망나니
왕자가
LEGEND OF SWORD'S SONG
글럼프
퓨전 판타지
장편소설
되었다
GOLEM
FACTORY

I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE

-Legend of Sword's Song-

– 망나니 1왕자가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 6 -

-AUTHOR-

Glump

[Active Translations]

CHAPTER 251
KNIGHT'S LAND (1)

Hansen was still a young man when he became an official ranger.

However, he soon became famous in Winter Castle, with everyone in the vicinity knowing his name. It wasn't specifically because he was good, nor because of some great achievement.

It was all just because of Hansen's words.

"If I become a ranger, I'm going to kick Jordan's ass!"

When asked about his motive for applying, Hansen followed the advice of the soldier he had met in the East. He had done so naively, not knowing what aftermath his statement would have.

"What? Kick Jordan's ass?"

"I'll tie him upside down and let his arse stick into the air for three days and three nights!"

Hansen even excitedly shouted words the soldier had not told him to say. He found out the truth shortly thereafter.

The unnamed man Hansen had met in the village was not an ordinary soldier, but a Ranger of Balahard. And no one could overlook the fact that Jordan was one of the best soldiers in the kingdom and a Ranger Captain. In fact, few would deny that the best ranger in Balahard was named Jordan.

And Hansen still remained unaware of how boasting and jibing words were magic spells that pulled men through winter. By the time Hansen realized it, he had already gone through his first harsh season.

"He's good enough to kick Company Captain Jordan's ass!"

The instructors now treated Hansen in their own special manner.

“No matter what anyone says, Captain Jordan is the best ranger in this castle! And as this is so, even when a hundred years have passed, you shall never kick Jordan’s ass! Now, at least be prepared to get your own one kicked!”

During the severe training, the instructor never left Hansen’s side.

“Who are you?! Where is that awesome guy who wanted to kick Company Captain Jordan’s naked arse!”

Some rangers had heard the rumor and visited the training ground, volunteering as instructors.

“I told them there are no useful lads lately, and we’ve needed some people to join up for a long time. What does that mean? It means I’ll give you a role if you prove useful.”

Thanks to this, Hansen was able to acquire the basic skills of a ranger in a short time, and his quick appointment to full ranger was unprecedented.

“Congratulations. Finally, you’re getting closer to your dream of stripping off Company Commander Jordan’s clothes and hanging him upside down, proceeding to kick his ass tenaciously for three days and three nights.”

At that time, Hansen was so devastated that he could spare no thought for the ever-fatter rumors that surrounded him. His only comfort lay in the fact that he had escaped from the hellish three months of intensive education.

This comfort was illusory. The real hell only then began. As a ranger, Hansen ascended Winter Castle’s wall for the first time. Upon that wall, Hansen was tested to the brink of death while enduring the incomparably bitter wind and cold. And even while the weather raged, the monsters attacked. There were at first dozens, which quickly became hundreds.

“Fire!”

Hansen fired his crossbow as he aimed at the crowd of monsters. At first, the volleys were enough to hold them back. A hundred or so monsters couldn’t reach the wall as they died in the hail of bolts.

But over time, things changed. The number of monsters gradually increased and quickly became hundreds. Among the beasts were ogres, trolls, and other beings that could not be slain with crossbows alone.

Hansen was completely terrified as he watched the monsters reach the face of the wall and begin pounding on the gates.

“Why don’t we fire the dwarven cannons? You’re not using them, in any case!” Hansen shouted, fearing that the gates would be breached right away.

“Do you know how much iron goes into one cannonball? We shoot these precious things at those big guys over there,” an old ranger replied in a dismayed voice.

“Don’t fear. They can’t penetrate. And even if we don’t use the iron guns, there are many ways to deal with them.”

A terrifying roar broke out just as the ranger stopped talking. Hansen turned his head, pursuing the sound, then he stiffened. Trolls and Ogres were on fire as they roared and ran wildly about.

“This time, the White Night Tower wizards come out first. The lancers will charge if they need to.”

As Hansen stared at it all, the old ranger explained things to him. Only then did Hansen realize that the black-armored lancers had mounted their horses and were ready to charge out.

“Get your mind straight. We have to deal with the monsters that the wizards leave over.”

Once the large monsters pounding at the gates were consumed by magical fire, smaller monsters began scaling the walls. Hansen loaded and fired bolts to the point where his fingers began to bleed.

The events of that day replayed through all of winter.

On some days, the wizards came out, and on others, the black lancers charged out to intercept large monsters. And Hansen had to battle day and night with the monsters that they couldn’t deal with. Hansen fought and fought, with only survival in mind.

“Is it that difficult? Endure. If you die here, you won’t be buried in a special place.”

The elderly rangers around Hansen continued to flap their gums, but the words never reached his ears.

And after all the crazy fighting, winter passed. The hard times in which Hansen had wished for death came to an end.

“Ha. I lived through it,” Hansen said again and again, so happy and grateful was he for being alive. The senior rangers quickly poured icy water over his mood.

“Don’t get cocky, kid. We all die in our time.”

“The walls are crowded right now, but in the past, we had to eat and sleep on the wall. Why? Because we could not change ranks, we always lacked troops.”

“There were no dwarves — there were no iron guns.”

“We couldn’t even dream of the magicians’ aid.”

“Ah, but the monster numbers, after declining last year, have picked up again this year.”

“It’s nothing compared to the past.”

“That’s true.”

Veteran rangers surrounded Hansen and started speaking about the numerous wars that they have fought in Winter Castle. Among the tales was the fairly well-known one of the Warlord’s war. It was the first time Hansen heard about the battle against the dead and the war against the Overlord.

It was all quite surprising and exciting, but that was all it was.

Like all young people in the world, Hansen also dismissed such sagas as the ramblings of old people. The tales did not touch him; they did not speak of things he had experienced in person.

“Compared to our time, the current war is a game for kids.”

These veteran rangers, who had not spoken a word of complaint despite barely surviving the winter, were on the verge of becoming very angry.

They weren't in a good mood, and it seemed to Hansen that they disparaged the hard work and deadly odds he had faced. If it had been some time ago, Hansen would have remained silent. His temper had become short after battling with monsters, however. Hansen expressed his dissatisfaction with the pretension of the veteran rangers.

"I suffered enough to wish for death."

The old rangers looked at Hansen and laughed.

"Why's this pretty guy making so much noise?"

"Doesn't he look more like a fat cow? I guess he lived without taking a leak from the walls."

"Yeah, he does sound a bit full of himself."

"What the hell is-" Hansen demanded as he shook his head, then suddenly stiffened. The eyes of the veterans were like never before.

"At that time, we fought only to live. I endured so much pain that I wanted to die, and then, I wanted nothing."

"At that time, we died like birds."

Such short words were heavy indeed, and Hansen dared not open his mouth in argument.

"Well, let's leave all these melancholy things!" one of the veterans said cheerfully as he clapped his hands. The other rangers also started making loud, happy noises as if they had completely forgotten about the previous conversation.

Only Hansen could not cheer along; he rather looked at them, his mouth closed.

"But why did we come to this guy?" one of the rangers asked after a long time.

"I think we came here to tell him something."

The rangers tilted their heads as they studied Hansen.

“Ah! Right! You, Hansen! The acting commander is looking for you!”

The old ranger smiled brightly after remembering this.

“Acting commander?”

“Uh-huh. He said he was in a hurry, so go there quickly.”

“When were you told this?”

“In the morning.”

Hansen looked at the sky. The sun had already passed overhead and was declining toward dusk.

“Hah! Why do you only tell me now!”

Once the battle ended, the rangers’ mental screws were loosened, but Hansen knew the acting commander was always quite stern.

“Where do I go!”

“At this time of day, he’ll be in his office.’

In response to the rangers’ carefree responses, Hansen shook his head and set off at a run.

“Ranger Hansen, belonging to the third platoon of Ninth Company, stationed on the north wall! Reporting as ordered!”

Arriving at the office door, Hansen gave a lengthy shout. From inside, he heard a voice that was too heavy to be compared with those of the frivolous rangers.

“Come in.”

Hansen opened the door.

A one-eyed middle-aged man sat at a desk near the door and greeted Hansen with a

firm face.

“You’re late.”

Hansen was about to make an excuse, but Quéon Lichtheim, acting commander, spoke first.

“I hear that before you became a ranger, you traveled the kingdom as a peddler? Am I rightly informed on this matter?”

“I didn’t trade all over the kingdom, but I wandered the eastern and central regions for about four years.”

“Have you never been to the West and South?”

“It’s not like I’ve never been there, but I haven’t been everywhere.”

The acting commander gave a happy laugh.

“That is very good.”

Hansen had no idea what unknown impulse had made the firm man smile.

However, the one-eyed knight seemed to have no intention of explaining things to him.

He merely waved his hand and ordered Hansen to go out. It was on the very next day that Hansen discovered what was happening.

“Ranger Hansen. As of the present time, you are no longer a member of the third platoon of the Third Company’s north wall garrison. You are now part of a contingent heading to the central region. It will be a long way’s travel, so be sure to prepare yourself.”

“What must I do?”

“It seems that commander Balahard has requested the dispatch of additional troops. The problem is, all those who know the way well have gone with him. Our company and platoon commanders are unable to leave their posts. The only people who remain to us are the northern villagers, who have never left this land.”

“I’m a guide.”

The knight nodded. Hansen was fascinated and filled with pleasure. It was nice that he now had an opportunity to leave the cold and bleak Winter Castle. There was no reason for him to refuse the role of guide, as long as he could escape from the chatty old rangers.

“When must I be ready?” asked Hansen, and the knight said that the contingent would leave within a week. Hansen was ready to leave the castle immediately.

“Sent off to a cushy mission, huh? I took care of myself all these years without dying. You won’t like it so much without us.”

The veterans could not hide their excitement and jeered at Hansen, seeing if they could get a rise out of him.

“It’s a nice area, what kind of person wouldn’t like it? I never wished to be here,” Hansen replied to the rangers without a sign of weakness.

The rangers muttered, ‘It’s strange’, not understanding Hansen’s complaints. Every one of them was anxious to return to the northern wall. They started talking about things like that, and Hansen knew what they said was not false.

According to his observations, Hansen knew the soldiers of this insane fortress were anxious because they were not in the toughest of situations. It was a bizarre way of thinking Hansen couldn’t understand. It was still nice now, though, as he would soon bid this hellish place goodbye.

It was said that Duke Balahard’s troops had been stationed in the center for half a year. Hansen hoped that he too would be stationed there. Then, he would again be able to meet the Steel Knight. Hansen grinned widely at the thought.

The rangers saw his face and shoved their fingers at him, then turned around.

And the day of departure finally came. Hansen rode between the knights who led the contingent to the central region; he was able to escape Winter Castle.

“I’m sure that, somehow, his Highness will stand out.”

“It speaks of his intuition, which has been strengthened on the battlefield. I say the

future is no different for Jordan."

The chattering of the elder rangers was somewhat lazy as they followed the contingent outside the walls. All Hansen's unpleasant thoughts disappeared as soon as he saw the scenery of the fortress. It was far more pleasant than the frantic existence Hansen had lived through every day on the wall.

Hansen hummed as he guided the contingent. Just before they crossed the bridge over the Rhinethes River, northern knights met them from the south. Then, after three more days of travel, they finally reached the gateway to the city ruled by Count Brandenburg.

Citizens of the city warmly welcomed the northern forces.

Through the intermittent fragments of words that Hansen heard mixed in between the cheers, he learned that these citizens had escaped slaughter thanks to northern reinforcements in the Warlord's war. They had not forgotten their gratitude.

"Long live the Balahard Rangers!"

The citizens shouted the names of the rangers far more than that of any knight. Hansen felt strange in response to their cheers. He couldn't define it exactly, but it was a pretty good feeling. Hansen had been walking along the street with the contingent when he suddenly stopped – before his eyes, a large poster was affixed to the wall.

——

I say to all those who accumulate mana in their hearts: Do not hesitate to come to me.

——

Had it not been for the bright, golden symbol at the bottom of the paper, Hansen would never have stopped in front of such a childish phrase.

It was the crest of the roaring gold lion.

Surprisingly, a trick used by third-class mercenaries now made out part of a royal decree. And it wasn't any royal decree-

—

If you are a knight, you will be accepted as a member of the newly created Royal Knights or Blood Lion Knights.

-Adrian Leonberger

—

It was a decree that had been issued by Prince Adrian Leonberger, the Lion of the North, proud son of the Leonberger family, and all his other names. Hansen didn't know why Adrian Leonberger had issued such a proclamation, but he did reach one conclusion as he listened to the noise around him.

"It's not only in Leonberg! The news has reached outside the kingdom."

"They say that users of mana hearts, who have always been treated like dirt, are gathering at a tremendous pace!"

The Crown Prince's decree had managed to shake the entire world.

CHAPTER 252
KNIGHT'S LAND (2)

While the contingent's knights were busy unpacking, Hansen left the dormitory with the task of examining the atmosphere of the city. It wasn't that difficult of a task overall.

"Are you a soldier from the north?"

"My! That means you're a ranger from Balahard!"

The citizens were particularly friendly to the soldiers of the north and more so to those from Balahard. Hansen did not need to ask any questions; they readily informed him about the central region's status.

"It's a tragedy that those four villages have been ruined, but it's still fortunate that the carnage did not spread further."

"To be honest, I thought the true end had come. The rumors were all very nasty."

"I can still hear ugly rumors here and there, but I believe everything will soon calm down, what with the knights riding around."

The central part, which had been chaotic before Hansen had left it, had become stable during winter.

"This is all thanks to the royal family's quick steps."

"Who can deny that? Long live our royal family."

The citizens started cheering the royal family until their throats became dry. The name most frequently mentioned was that of the Crown Prince, Adrian Leonberger.

When none knew of the troubles that would come to the world, Prince Adrian urged the royal family to deploy the central army and the champions.

Knowing the monsters' existence without seeing them, the prince's wisdom had proven the secret weapon that defeated them.

At first, the citizens had merely fervently admired the Crown Prince; now, they began singing his praises. Eventually, they began talking again, this time of the battle on the Rhinethes, many years before the current troubles. They later also began to praise the Crown Prince for his achievement of defeating the Imperial Army on the border.

It was a viewpoint Hansen could not sympathize with, as he had begun to wander the world with his backpack after suffering from the tyranny of nobles. And at that time, the nobles' greed had reached extreme lengths while the royal family merely watched on.

Give them the disease, and then give them the medicine? Wasn't it the call for independence that caused the war and cost the lives of so many people?

After Hansen had lived some years as a peddler, he came to believe that those who live in fine clothes and enjoy bountiful dinners throughout their lives were excessively lustful.

Hansen had chatted about this with the Winter Castle rangers just once. He had spoken his thoughts.

"Good clothes, good food? This cub is making funny sounds."

The rangers looked at Hansen and started laughing, finding his statement interesting. On that day, he was pushed to the brink of death.

"Good clothes? Rarely have I seen his Highness wear fine clothes, asshole," a ranger growled after the training as he grabbed onto Hansen's ragged shirt. The man's voice was bloody and his expression sharp, as if dealing with an enemy, so Hansen dared not complain even after the rough treatment. It was only around dawn the next day when he was able to shake off his anger about the rough training session. Since then, Hansen never spoke of the royal family, and especially not about the prince.

He grew more cautious after he learned that the Balahard Rangers supported the Crown Prince like a god. Criticism of the prince was taboo, at least in Winter Castle. Hansen had enough experience with how terrifyingly pleasant rangers can turn when a taboo is committed. Still, he did not change his thinking.

Whenever he spoke, he would only half-heartedly mirror the feelings of those Crown Prince fanatics he lived amongst. It was the same now. Hansen became lost in his thoughts as he watched the citizens fervently praising and chanting the Crown Prince's name.

If only the royal family had done the job properly from the start. Hansen didn't dare tell these people that if so many had not died in the war against the Empire, then the remote villages would not so easily have been ravaged by monsters.

Instead, Hansen turned around quietly and headed for another neighborhood. There, he again asked about the kingdom's situation. At first, the citizens spoke about the surrounding area; then, they quickly praised the royal family and the Crown Prince.

And each time, Hansen left them without a word, hiding his uncomfortable mind.

In the meantime, the citizens told him the news that other countries have failed to calm the chaos early and that it was spiraling out of control. It was said that even the Empire was in a state of peak confusion. Hansen went straight back to the lodgings, and he told what he had seen and heard to the commander of the contingent.

"They didn't completely drive away the monsters, yet it seems that the extermination team has made great gains. There are many who praise the knights and soldiers who have spread throughout the kingdom. On the other hand, it seems that other countries are struggling, having failed to suppress the monsters' movement early."

In fact, most of what Hansen had heard had been compliments toward the royal family, but he did not wish to praise the Leonbergers with his own voice.

"It seems like everything has been in a relatively calm state, but I don't know why the Crown Prince has ordered the mustering of knights all over the kingdom at this time."

The knight tilted his head.

"Well, if you meet his Highness, you will know."

The knight then straightened himself and gestured with his hand, eventually showing Hansen out.

"It would be nice if we are going to fight again."

Only Hansen frowned. By all means, he hoped the royal family would not do reckless things, but as the knight had said, there was a reason for the Crown Prince to summon the knights.

However, no matter how much the reluctant ranger considered things, he could not reach a conclusion. He struggled to shake off his thoughts, finally falling asleep.

The next was terribly bright when the contingent left the city. After two days of marching, they met up with Count Brandenburg's cavalry. Guided by them, the force rode toward the extermination's headquarters, located a day away.

And finally, they reached the little old fortress. Hansen saw colored flags upon the main building, which must have been hoisted when the abandoned fortress was reclaimed.

There was the golden lion of the Leonberger royal family, the unique shields of Balahard, and the strung bow of Brandenburg. Many flags of families unknown to Hansen also fluttered in the wind.

The command center contained at least twenty families' troops, all in all.

It was a sight that seemed more like a war camp than a subjugation campaign. Hansen was surprised by the size of the operation; it was larger than he had expected. However, there were not so many troops staying in the fortress. At best, a hundred or so soldiers and several knights were garrisoned here.

Through Count Brandenburg, who met the contingent, they learned that most other lords and knights had left the headquarters to defeat the monsters.

And-

"His Highness is not currently at command."

The prince was among those who were away.

"I heard that his Majesty forbade his Highness's direct participation in the subjugation, under royal decree…"

"I know that too," Count Brandenburg responded with a conflicted face and passed the explanation to someone else.

“His Highness is not here.”

Vincent Balahard, Lord of Winter Castle, explained the current situation on behalf of the count.

“When I was off-guard for a moment, he disappeared, just leaving a note saying he was going to come back soon.”

It was an absurd thing for Hansen to hear as he listened to the distant conversation between the duke and the knights.

“It looks like he couldn’t stand it and secretly escaped.”

“But this time, he was patient for half a year — he truly was.”

However, the contingent’s knights showed no surprise at the duke’s words.

“How long has he been gone?”

“About fifteen days have passed. He disappeared immediately after hearing the news that a horde of monsters appeared in a town two days to the west.”

“Maybe he’s headed some other place?”

“I’m sure he’ll do that, but since I’m responsible, I have to think of the former possibility as sufficiently probable.”

Hansen listened to their conversation with a grim face.

“The palace knights and Jordan are pursuing his Highness, and I only hope they will return with him before he gets in trouble.”

Hansen couldn’t tell whether the current conversation was about the Crown Prince of a country or casual gossip about a naughty child.

“His Highness did give his word.”

“Oh my God, a guarantee from him? That is quite a big deal.”

“He’ll not break his word this time.”

“I bet you’ll swallow those words once his Highness comes back.”

“No. Never.”

Vincent clutched at his bushy head and complained that he would become bald at his young age because of the Crown Prince.

“Everything is still fine. I don’t know about later, though.”

The contingent’s knights all burst into laughter. Hansen decided to give up on understanding their actions. He had thought the rangers were weird, but Commander Balahard and the knights were insane. Hansen couldn’t stop himself from shaking his head. Suddenly, the subject of the conversation turned to him.

“Who is the guy named Hansen?”

Hansen stepped forward, coming to stand before Winter Castle’s lord.

“Me! I am Hansen!” he cried, his body extremely tense. When Hansen had seen the duke from a distance, he had not felt it. Now, standing before the man, he knew Vincent Balahard was no joke.

“You’re that nasty recruit who will kick Jordan’s ass?”

Hansen had by now turned completely pale.

He hadn’t thought that a single mistake would spread so far, and he never knew a man who was lord of a castle would show any interest in a ranger’s words. Hansen wanted to confess he never knew Jordan was an excellent ranger, he wanted to correct the misunderstanding, but the duke spoke first.

“Your Highness’s disappearance is quite the unfortunate event for everyone, but in the end, it’s lucky for you. If his Highness had not disappeared, Jordan would not have been away.”

When Hansen heard the words, he realized that his remarks had reached Jordan’s ears, and he became even more pale and tired.

“Well, I’m sure they’ll be back soon,” the duke smiled, fueling Hansen’s anxiety.

A week passed by and the once-empty fortress became crowded with knights and rangers returning from the subjugation.

“You’re that rumored recruit!”

Every Ranger I met came to Hansen and talked about his infamy. Through them, he heard that the palace knights and rangers were returning with their Highness.

As time passed, the fortress began to overflow with energy, and Duke Balahard’s face also became noticeably brighter. In contrast, Hansen’s visage gradually darkened.

Again, some time passed. The fortress became so crowded that it seemed as if it would burst apart if more troops arrived, not to speak about the knights summoned by the prince or even the knight wannabes flocking here.

And another few days had passed when the contingent arrived at the fortress. The day Hansen had dreaded arrived.

“The Crown Prince is back!”

Early in the morning, the knights and rangers from the fortress gathered before its gates to welcome the returning prince. Prince Adrian appeared some distance away on the plains, riding a white horse. He was pressing his cloak tightly to his body, and while Hansen saw only his chin and mouth, it was enough to know that the prince wasn’t feeling well. Prince Adrian’s mouth was bloody as if teeth had been knocked out.

“I don’t know how lucky you are to return safely.”

The Winter Commander greeted the Crown Prince on behalf of everyone, his teeth tightly clenched. Even while he pretended not to be, Hansen saw in his anger in his gaze.

The prince spoke after he rode up to the duke.

“Vincent,” he laughed awkwardly, raising his head.

“Let’s go in and hear the details. I hope there was a reason you had to leave without saying anything.”

After Vincent had spoken in a crushed voice, the Crown Prince's face became cow-like as if he was being led to the slaughterhouse.

Hansen's face was no different as he looked at them. He wasn't even concerned about the fact the royal heir and the hero of the north was in front of him for the first time in his life.

Hansen looked at the ranger standing behind the prince. His scarred face looked somehow disgusting; a look that exactly matched what Hansen had heard in Winter Castle. He intuitively knew that this was Jordan. The Ranger's eyes glanced everywhere, scanning over the soldiers and the knights until they settled upon the newly arrived contingent.

The rolling eyeballs stopped, coming to rest exactly on Hansen. The ranger laughed, and to Hansen, it seemed like the smile of a reaper.

"What do you see that's so funny?"

The prince, who had been walking toward the fortress like a doomed cow, suddenly turned around to follow the ranger's gaze. The Crown prince's eyes also settled on Hansen.

"You are the guy who's aiming for Jordan's ass!"

It wasn't something Hansen had ever thought would come up, yet the prince's words sounded misleadingly friendly.

"Let's see whether you are capable of your ambition-"

The prince suddenly closed his mouth and widened his eyes. Hansen blinked, not understanding the royal's sudden behavior.

Then he suddenly realized that the prince was looking at a spot above him instead of at him. Prince Adrian's eyes, staring at empty air, constantly moved as if reading.

Then, after a while, when those busy eyes stopped, the Crown Prince said with a wide smile, "I wondered why the rest of you guys didn't appear."

Hansen was confused for a moment, as the voice had suddenly become so harsh. Maybe he was only now seeing the true Crown Prince.

CHAPTER 253
KNIGHT'S LAND (3)

At this point, I had already made up my mind. This time, I would truly focus upon the growth of the knights, not myself. I was about to lead them to a higher place using this opportunity as a springboard. So, I was forced to stay still, my butt itching to move while I listened to the reports of messengers coming every day. It wasn't easy.

I wanted to grab my sword and run out of the fort right now.

In particular, when one messenger spoke of a type of monster that was quite tough, my heart had already left the fort, charging over the wild plain. I was distracted while imagining myself run across the land, engaged in a fierce battle with monsters.

Into my mind came countless reasons for me not to leave the fortress. First, Arwen and the other champions needed information about monsters. My top priority was to look at the appearance and characteristics detailed in each report, gauge their identity, and tell the champions how sharp their teeth and potent their venom were.

Only then could the knights and soldiers stem the carnage and reduce the damage done to the suffering people. This would not be something I could do if I left the fort and wandered around the kingdom.

Secondly, I had to follow the royal decree. The king sent a messenger several times to warn me, urging me to stay stationary in the central region. The king had closed his eyes to my current behavior of refusing to return, but I knew he would tolerate no more disobedience. In the event of me violating this decree, I will be prevented from fighting where I want to fight in the coming war against the Empire. I would be stationed where the king wanted me stationed.

Thirdly, Vincent's presence was on my mind.

In the end, it had been Vincent who persuaded the king not to keep me in the palace. Now, it was Vincent who would take responsibility for me in the event of an accident. It was something I never wished: for Vincent to be punished on my behalf.

There were countless other reasons why I shouldn't leave the fortress. I reminded myself of that and forced myself to stay. It was a terrible punishment for me and unbearable torture.

The vitality I had regained after escaping from the cramped royal palace no longer remained in me. Day by day, I lost my lust for life. A terrible lethargy came upon me.

I felt like I would become mentally ill were I to persevere a little longer. By that time, the urgent reports and requests that had rained down upon me slowed to a trickle. The knights and champions had adapted to battling the ancient monsters, and my information was no longer needed.

Then, the stress that had accumulated within me made a gear explode in the clockwork of my mind.

"Uh…?"

When I came to my senses, I was galloping out of the fort and onto the plain.

"It's true… I've already come out, so I can't go back now."

I looked toward the fortress, which was so distant that it soon went out of view, then turned myself straight on the horse. Just like that, I headed to the west, riding straight for a village afflicted by monsters.

It was unavoidable to wander longer on a journey without a capable guide, and I had none. However, I was able to reach my destination in good time after riding without halt. Once there, I acted as if I was one of the leading knights, reassuring the villagers. Just at the visit of one knight, they rejoiced as if they had been saved.

Standing before them, my cause became clear: the development of the kingdom's knights was the priority. The penalties Vincent and I would face in the future became a minor nuisance when weighed against my purpose.

It was a matter of life or death for these villagers now, and I knew it was more important for me to endure for their sake so that they could enjoy peace tomorrow.

I shook the last bit of hesitation from my heart and took action. Through the tales of the villagers, I learned where the monster den was and attacked it straight away.

The monsters that I encountered weren't very great. However, they had bred at a tremendous pace in a short time. And I, regrettably for them, poured out the bitter resentment I had held pent up within myself for the past half-year.

When I gripped my sword and cleaved into them, a pleasurable feeling coursed through me.

I was able to relieve some of my accumulated stress while I cut down the monsters that rushed at me in an endless horde. Once I completely destroyed their colony, I even felt full. My sense of satisfaction did not last too long.

"Your Highness, it's time to stop."

I had barely shaken the blood from my sword when Carls, his palace knights, and that damned Jordan came to me. For a moment, I thought I would run away, but Carls had read my thoughts well. He started listing to me what would happen were I to escape.

The consequences were as terrifying as possible, and Carls' description was astonishingly vivid and in a tragic tone.

"All those futures will be averted if your Highness returns with us now."

I was discouraged, considering the futures I had known would come to me, without having fully realized how grim they were. So, I returned with the search party.

My footsteps felt heavy. It was as if I was thirsty, yet my lips were wet. It was as if I hungered after barely brushing the crumbs from my mouth. It was then that I recalled the villagers' faces, and so calmed my heart. They had been happy to see me and cheered when they heard that the monsters had been annihilated. I even laughed as I remembered their stupid faces when they realized that the one they had thought to be a knight was, in truth, the Crown Prince.

And I locked that memory away in my heart. Above all else, the priority now was to save those who had fallen in danger. The first thing I had to do was get the populace back to their peaceful routines.

In other words, I had done my duty as a crown prince and followed the sense of duty I bore as a knight.

“I heard your excuse.”

I woke up from my thoughts at that voice.

“So, your Highness wants to say your actions were not a big mistake because you see it as your knightly mission and your princely duty?”

Vincent was staring at me with a cold face.

“Uh…”

I once again justified my actions, even if my words might sound a bit brazen to Vincent. My second attempt didn’t work either.

“Didn’t you yourself say that by holding a sword on your own, you can settle this little mess, but it can’t be the fundamental solution?”

Vincent denied my cause with that single statement.

“Right now, neither the champions nor the knights need my information anymore-”

Before I was done speaking, Vincent snapped a stack of letters in front of me.

“These are the letters that flew into the fortress while your Highness was away. Please check who sent each letter and what they contain.”

I started with the pile of letters as I read them one by one. Some were from the champions, while others were from lords. Each sender was different, and the letters came from every direction, but their contents were similar.

The letters were asking me for information on newly revealed monsters and countermeasures to employ against them.

“Where are these guys crawling out from now?”

I turned away from Vincent with an awkward face and started writing replies to every letter.

‘Shwack!’ Vincent snatched up the letters I had finished writing.

He then called a knight who was waiting outside, handed him the letters, and spoke, making sure I heard him.

“This is very urgent. Pick out the fastest cavalry and make sure this correspondence arrives as quickly as possible.”

I was embarrassed, and Vincent turned to me with folded arms. There was no malice in his gaze.

“Woo. That at least is done, good. In the first place, I didn’t believe your Highness would have an accident. Still, I can accept this.”

“Then-”

“No. I will report it to his Majesty. Because that is the promise I had made.”

Vincent said that the Balahards never broke their promises, no matter what, and that he would report all events to the king. I didn’t have a reason to stop him — I didn’t care. I was deep in thought, wondering whether I might be completely excluded from the next war when I heard Vincent give a long sigh.

“His Majesty said he did not believe your Highness would fully follow the royal decree. So he told me that I could close my eyes to only one infraction. He also said he would trust my judgment of when to show leniency.”

So I wasn’t done for! Vincent’s words brought light to my eyes.

“I’m going to report that I was compelled by the lack of available troops in a situation where we were fighting against time. That is in my remit, so his Majesty will not consider it very strange.”

“That means…”

“Even if the report is sent, there will be no great disadvantage.”

“Vincent, you’re the best!”

I got up from my seat and hugged Vincent.

“Only this time. Next time, you will have to face his Majesty’s punishment directly.”

“Of course! I’m not going to have an accident again! This time I felt really cramped, so something happened to my head! I truly wondered if I would die from suffering such anxiety.

“I know. That’s why I didn’t stop your Highness, even when I saw you run off.”

Vincent said that even though he knew I was leaving the fort, he had tolerated it.

“Then why did Carls and Jordan-”

“I thought you would come back after riding away some of your boredom. If I knew you would go so far, I wouldn’t have let you leave.”

Vincent sighed and pushed me away. Then he took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to me.

“This letter is also for your Highness, so I hand it over,” Vincent said and turned around, leaving the room. I wasn’t sure if Vincent held it against me for leaving. Hearing him speak with the knights outside the door, I checked the origin of the letter.

It came from the Gifted Lion Citadel. Without hesitation, I removed the seal from the envelope, and inside were two letters with different seals.

I first read the one stamped by Montpellier.

———

As a result of secretly spreading rumors, as commanded, a large number of mercenaries have been gathered. I will filter out those among them who are notorious or suspicious and send them back over the border.

———

I immediately checked the other letter. It was stamped with the seal of the Central Army’s commander, tasked with guarding the border.

———

The work of sorting out and classifying those who appear to be spies and impure

individuals from among the groups sent by Count Montpellier has been completed. However, the number of those remaining is much larger than expected. Confusion is expected to spread if they are sent into the kingdom at once.

I seek your Highness's wisdom on how to do this.

———

I went through past reports I kept in my drawer before writing a reply to the commander. Among them, I found the name of the champion who was closest to the southern fortress and grabbed my pen.

———

I will send Bernardo Eli. Hand the mercenaries over to him.

———

Another letter was also written on the spot, urging Eli to head south. I called Carls, who was waiting outside the door. I stressed the urgent need and that he had to make sure the letters were delivered as soon as possible.

Carls, having been instructed, looked down and tried to leave the room.

"There is one more thing," I stopped him. "There should be a guy named Hansen among the rangers from the north at this time."

"Ah. The ranger, Jordan's-"

I nodded at Carls and ordered, "Find him and tell him to come to my room right away."

"I will take care of it straight away."

Soon after Carls had left, the new ranger found my room. Next to him was Jordan, who I had not even called.

"He's in the presence of the Crown Prince of Leonberg. If he makes a mistake, I won't let it go," Jordan growled. The ranger rookie, who had been frozen, tensed even tighter. Looking at his form, I was sure there had been an intimate conversation

between the two before they came here. I had to laugh.

“Your Highness may have heard rumors, but this guy knows nothing on the subject of respect. So, in case he might make a mistake in front of your Highness, I firmly trained him before he came,” Jordan said in a tone supportive of me. He didn’t know what I was thinking.

“Is it possible that you raised your hand to him?” I asked, just in case.

“What a thing to say! There is no such childish behavior in the traditions of we Balahard Rangers!” Jordan protested as I stared at him.

“Although, there is a tradition of breaking in the new ranks by talking openly in order to better understand each other. Or, we have a little rough-and-tumble in preparation for a real battle!”

Hearing that, I laughed again. It sounded like Jordan already held an open conversation or a little fight with Hansen before coming here.

“Jordan.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

I looked at the ranger, who was still unable to figure out the situation.

“Please, in the future, I hope you will be able to keep your ass as safe as you do now.”

I first expressed my condolences for his upcoming tragedy. I looked at the poor Ranger Jordan, who could only blink in confusion. With that, I focused on the man standing next to him.

There had existed a man who, once angry, was so tough that even the Dragon Slayer had struggled to calm him. This Sword Master was called a ‘dirty woodcutter’ by his comrades and a ‘wild slayer’ by his enemies. After Gallahan and Boris, the third scion of the kingdom’s ancient order appeared in front of me.

The man had been Hannibal, the most violent and fierce Blood Lion, and his descendant was before my eyes. And this man had not only Hannibal’s talent but also his wild nature. I happily laughed as I watched the lion cub who had not yet realized his identity but who would soon carry on the legacy of his ancestor.

All the while, I had begun to deeply mourn for the poor ranger.

CHAPTER 254
KNIGHT'S LAND (4)

I asked Hannibal's descendant what weapons he was skilled with.

"I learned this and that by becoming a Ranger, but the most familiar thing is the ax."

Before becoming a ranger and wandering the world as a peddler, Hansen's face looked awkward for some reason when he said he had been a lumberjack for a living.

As time passed, the ranger said, he felt ashamed for never getting rid of his wood ax. But I took it for granted; his ancestor had been no different. Hannibal's most beloved weapons had been his two wood axes. Even after the harsh training and becoming a ranger, the ax was still most familiar to Hansen. This was simply because of the aptitude inherited from his ancestors, and it was not a shameful thing.

"From today on, you will drop everything else and practice handling the ax."

"What do you mean by that…?"

"From this point in time, you are no longer a ranger."

Hansen looked at me with a hard face. When I saw his expression, I knew he expected something bad to come, having firmly misunderstood my words. He probably thought he was being punished, expelled from the rangers for his blasphemy.

I immediately corrected the misunderstanding.

"From now on, you serve directly under the Crown Prince, not as a Balahard Ranger. Your position is that of knight trainee, and your exact post will be determined once I appoint one to you."

"Ah?"

Hansen opened his mouth and looked at me. As I watched his stupefied look, I burst

into laughter. He took to his ancestor, who had also been innocent. Hannibal had been just as clumsy with hiding his facial expressions as the young man before me. Even after he had raised himself up as a Blood Lion and became one of the best in the kingdom, that aspect of Hannibal had remained unchanged.

Of course, it didn't matter much when he wielded his ax.

Looking at Hansen, who still stared at me with a distracted and stupid face, I guessed that he was unaware of his family's history. It wasn't surprising.

I had already learned through Gallahan and Boris that the Empire had decided to remove all mention of the Blood Lions from Leonberg's histories. Of course, they had not forgotten the teachings of their ancestors, even facing such suppression, but there was no law saying other descendants would be the same. Even Adelia had been unaware that her ancestor was a great knight named Agnes and that she had been a Predecessor. Instead, Adelia had lived as a maid.

"If you don't know, I can teach you from now on."

"Your Highness?" Jordan involuntarily expressed doubts on behalf of Hansen, who was still enchanted.

However, Jordan's expression was really worth seeing — he looked like a bedraggled dog as his gaze shifted between Hansen and me.

"Jordan."

"Yes, your Highness?"

Jordan's desperate expression quickly became a shining one when I called his name. But unfortunately, what I was going to say would counter the ranger's expectations.

"Again, I'll pray for your ass to be fine."

I merely expressed my sympathy, and Jordan looked at me as though he had been betrayed.

Figuring that I had finished my business, I gestured for the men to leave.

"That's it for now. I know you will be calling again soon."

Hansen's face became filled with anticipation, and Jordan's became even more gormless.

The contrast was so funny that I could no longer hold in my laughter.

After letting them out, I immediately found Vincent, then asked him to transfer Hansen Hannibal to my command.

Vincent stared at me, sighed, and said, "It looks like you like him."

I knew that he could see my anticipation for Hansen's future in my eyes.

"So, will you allow it or not?"

"What the hell are you going to use him for?"

"I am going to make him a knight."

"You're thinking of seeing Jordan get his ass kicked."

"It's not what I want, but it will happen."

Vincent burst out laughing and told me I could do whatever I wanted. He didn't even ask me if I wanted to raise the ranger into a knight after seeing his potential. Vincent already knew that I would do that, and that was it. Seeing his trustful glance, I felt sorry that I had slipped away from the fortress. Looking at me, Vincent expressed sudden dislike, saying I had to get rid of my expression before it got stuck like that.

Then, Vincent asked me something, as if just remembering it.

"Just how much will you grow your forces?"

It was a question that was ambiguous, but it was not difficult for me to understand its meaning.

"I'm going to gather as many as I can as soon as I can."

"Will the kingdom's finances survive? Even if they had been treated as insignificant mercenaries, they can't be paid like regular soldiers. They are mana handlers."

It was as Vincent said: our country was on the outskirts, and it was rare for anyone to visit it because there was no special produce to lure them.

Put simply, the kingdom had no money, and the army was a money-devouring phantom.

All the goods confiscated from Montpellier and the traitors have been liquidated to pay for the cost of war. The enormous reparations received in return for ending the war were also being rapidly exhausted to pay for the expansion and management of the troops.

If it went on this way, the treasury would run dry before next winter.

Accordingly, the nobles of the kingdom had suggested several times that they reduce their current troops. After the riots of the ancient things started, they said this less. Anyway, it was certain that the kingdom's finances were in disarray.

And in this situation, I was conducting a massive recruitment drive, so it wasn't strange for Vincent to be worried. I was very aware of the facts, so I had asked for patience from the marshal and the prime minister before distributing my decree.

I told them we needed forces to support our rear, and after a few days, I received permission to do what I intended to do.

After explaining this situation to Vincent, he still said to me with a fearful face, "Neither the prime minister nor the marshal would have guessed that your Highness would have done so much."

He said that if they had foreseen the current situation, they would never have supported my will.

"By now, they are also suffering from headaches."

When Vincent said he was sorry for them, I laughed.

"They've been comfortable with the money I've earned – it eased their worries. Will they resent me for this?"

I wasn't just saying it. I was the one who confiscated Montpellier's property, and I had the plan to behead the traitors and reclaim their property.

I forced the enormous reparation funds from the Empire and earned quite a bit of money by fighting as a mercenary for Dotrin.

“No matter what anyone says, it is undeniable that it is me who has fed the kingdom’s coffers until now.”

As I spoke, Vincent sighed and shook his head.

“So how much will you grow the army?”

“I told you, I’ll take as many as I can.”

“So I’m asking you to tell me how much that is.”

I frowned as I watched Vincent speak as if frustrated. What I was saying wasn’t so difficult to understand. However, I couldn’t be annoyed after causing Vincent worry, so I explained my intentions so he could more easily understand them.

“If a hundred people come, I will accept a hundred. And if a thousand people come, I will accept a thousand.”

In short, I was thinking of accepting everyone who came.

Of course, before that, all those with serious flaws in their personalities and past actions will have to be filtered out. But basically, my idea of accepting the maximum number of troops has not changed.

“But what if there are too many people to handle?” Vincent said as if finding my plan absurd. I just laughed.

In a world filled with chaos after the old ones’ return, and when the fees of mercenaries have soared to great amounts, how many people would come to this underdeveloped country at the end of the world?

I wasn’t sure, but there would be more mercenaries who have gone to the Empire or other places where funds are abundant. I thought so, I believed it, but it was not so. Some time passed.

Then, one day after Hannibal’s descendant created his mana heart, just like his ancestor, Bernardo Eli returned.

However, The number of people who followed him far exceeded my expectations. Even by a quick estimate, they were no less than a thousand.

I tilted my head. “I ordered you to send them in separate groups. Why did you bring them all at once?”

At first, I thought the southern commander had changed his mind, ignoring my order of dividing the mercenaries into separate groups to make their recruitment easier to control.

“We correctly send them out in divisions.”

That was until I heard Eli’s explanation.

He said that thanks to me, every fortress along the border was filled. The mercenaries who have arrived with him were just a fraction, less than a tenth.

Why? If they wanted work, the Empire would be overflowing with mercenaries. I couldn’t readily understand why so many mercenaries had migrated to the cold north.

“It seems that the mercenaries who went to Burgundy’s capital have been rejected one after another.”

Eli reported the situation across the border to me.

“At first, I thought that all their contracts were rejected because they were not worthy to serve in the eyes of the imperial family.”

But that wasn’t it.

The rejections of contracts occurred regardless of the size, capability, and reputation of a mercenary company. It was said that among those rejected were companies that everyone knew by name. It was rather strange that the Burgundy Empire had no intention of hiring mercenaries. Still, another question remained.

“Even if not by the imperial family, why didn’t the sneaky imperial lords hire them to bolster their forces?”

“There wasn’t one who did.”

Eli's answer was very different from what I expected; it wasn't common sense. It was said that unlike the kingdom, which predicted the chaos and responded swiftly, the Empire had completely failed in its initial response.

If they found hiring mercenaries undesirable, it was rather strange.

"The mercenaries were even banned from entering estates. Some lords sent enlists and knights to expel the mercenaries. Some even scattered the mercenaries found in their territory by force."

I laughed at actions I would only do were I insane.

And, of course, not all the imperial nobles could have gone crazy at once. There was only one truly insane being in the Empire, and I knew him well.

"The third princeps intervened."

Hearing my words, Eli's eyes had widened.

"How did you know? It is said that the princeps has issued an official decree in the imperial family's name from early on. If there is anyone who expands their troops, the Burgundies judged that they would be disobedient and would face severe punishment. Following the example of the northeastern rebels, it seems that there is unease that other nobles will revolt."

It was as expected: the imperial aristocracy was the group targeted by the unscrupulous actions of the third princeps.

"Ha."

My expectations were proved correct, but I wasn't happy at all.

Obviously, I have been waiting for a day like this. I have been looking forward to the moment when the ruinous traits of the idiot princeps fully bloom and lead the destruction of everything around him.

I had looked forward to it, but not anymore.

"The mercenaries who couldn't get jobs unavoidably scattered in all directions, and most of them said they were coming to our kingdom."

I was now sure that we would get caught up in the princeps' idiocy, ending up in a crisis where the kingdom's finances are destroyed. It was absurd, and I had to laugh. After drawing breath for a while, I felt someone's gaze and turned my head.

Behind Eli, the lined-up mercenaries were watching me — some with expectation-filled faces, some already looking discouraged, and others with faces full of curiosity.

As I looked at them, I sighed a little, then muttered within my mind, 'Judging.'

'Hwaak!'

At that moment, a great number of information screens appeared in the air.

As I watched the sparkling letters, the disturbance in my heart faded away like a lie. After seeing such sights, I changed my mind.

At first glance, the image of majestic, fully-armed knights awaiting the assault overlapped upon the sight of the mercenaries suffering from the harsh clime and looking like beggars after their long trek.

I raised my head and smiled.

"Your Highness?"

Seeing my sudden change of expression, Eli turned and followed my gaze. He tilted his head. His eyes seemed to ask what I was looking and laughing at. I didn't answer; he wouldn't be able to see it anyway — the dark clouds over the world and great perils facing the kingdom. But to me, it all seemed so clear.

The countless victories of this tiny nation over a grand empire, which ruled half the world for four centuries, and the kingdom's glorious past shined so brilliantly.

Leonberg's bright future will finally dawn again after today. The first name of our glorious kingdom will be reclaimed, forging a brilliant tomorrow.

Recalling its glorious old name, I stepped forward, facing a thousand mercenaries.

"Welcome to Leonberg, the Land of Knights."

CHAPTER 255
BLOOM IN DIFFICULTY (1)

I immediately, on the spot, started sorting out the mercenaries.

“You. You.”

I pointed my finger at some, separating them from the crowd.

“And all you guys.”

Sometimes, I separated entire mercenary companies. And so, the number of those split from the others was half the total.

I stared at them and said coldly, “You can go back.”

The five hundred mercenaries who had followed my muster without knowing why now widened their eyes, their questioning gazes now set upon me. They didn’t understand what standard I had used to determine their departure.

“Summon some of the troops and escort them to the border.”

As I glanced at those doubt-filled faces, I immediately told the rangers and knights to make sure these mercenaries were expelled from the country.

Dissatisfaction replaced doubt on the mercenaries’ faces. Since we dealt in a free market, they couldn’t dare get angry, and they could do nothing about it.

“I want to know the reason, though.”

One of the biggest guys came forward as a representative and asked me why.

“Should I even explain it?”

Despite my cold answer, the man bowed his head and spoke politely, showing no signs of anger.

“We have been told that the Leonberger royal family are recruiting people on a large scale. And after months of marching without a break, I finally arrived here. However, if you ask us to leave the kingdom as soon as we arrive, what are we to do?”

“Unfortunately, it is not my responsibility.”

“I have no intention spending the rest of my life begging for a job. As I said already, I just want to know why.”

It seemed that this man had quite a lot of experience dealing with ordinary nobles, but not with royalty.

“If you just say no and go, then we will be left without an answer. So please, be generous-“

A flash of light came before the man talking about the unfair treatment could finish his words.

‘Chik’

The man shut his mouth; a sword was touching his neck.

“I don’t know where you learned your manners, but you learned them wrong.”

It was Carls.

“Please have mercy, I-“

“In dealing with his Highness, look away from him as if he is the sun. If you open your mouth and face him as you do now, you will be blinded, and your tongue will be burned.

The man again shut his mouth, his face shuddering as he heard the dire warning.

“Carls.”

I watched silently, then ordered Carls to withdraw his blade.

“Keep my words in mind. Never speak before his Highness speaks first.”

It was only after giving the man a sharp-toned warning that Carls took away his blade. As Carls stood behind me and looked at the man, I knew he wasn't the only one who treated me like the sun. Right now, the rangers and Eli also treated me in this manner.

A sigh escaped from me, and after a few long breaths, I looked at the man again.

"You asked me why?"

The man glanced at Carls, before he answered me carefully.

"I heard that the Leonberger royal family was gathering people, and I said we had come a long way without stopping."

To this man, I said coldly, "Your answer already lies in your words."

The man's eyes stretched wide, and his face became filled with doubts.

"Because the royal family is looking for people, not blood-mad animals."

The man still seemed not to understand my words, and I clucked my tongue and whispered to him, "It felt like my nose would fall off because of the reek of blood on your body."

At my words, the man again glanced at Carls, then carefully opened his mouth.

"I didn't know the smell of blood on those who live by the sword was a big problem."

The man then asked if the thick smell of blood wasn't instead evidence of his wealth of practical combat experience. Unlike his previous cautious tone, I now knew that he was not ashamed about the smell of blood on his body but rather proud of himself.

I snorted.

"If the blood wasn't from innocent people, it would have been."

The man's eyes trembled. However, they shook for only a moment, and the man quickly hid his shame, taking on a casual face. He must have thought how it was possible for me to be smelling old blood. The man said he had never had the blood of

innocents on his hands. Of course, it was bullshit, and I would have no truck with it. It was clear before my eyes: the stigma upon their souls, their murderous traits being evidence of their evil deeds.

[Human Hunter]

[Slayer]

[Headtaker]

Each of the traits that rose above the heads of the five hundred mercenaries told me how they had lived.

“I was just doing a little more difficult work than others, and I was loyal to my employer’s contract. As a mercenary, I have never done anything dishonorable.”

The man did not know what I knew, so he lied to me until the end.

“I am confident in my skills, and I’m tough enough to do a good job. I bet that none of the sellswords out there are stronger than me.”

The man even boasted of his skills, becoming arrogant. He spoke the truth: none of the other mercenaries who arrived at the fortress were stronger than him. His natural state, having reached maturity, was so strong that it was close to that of Master — but it was the highest level the man could reach. This was a man whose character had already become innate and whose soul has been contaminated by evil and murderous deeds. The twisted karma he had accumulated during his life could grow no more.

I wouldn’t want such a man, no matter his skill. I waved him away with my hands as if he was annoying.

The mercenary opened his mouth again to try and persuaded me, then looked behind me, shut his mouth, and quietly walked away.

I picked out thirty of the knights awaiting my command, and along with a hundred rangers, I ordered them to lead the mercenaries to the border.

“Too few troops-” Eli began but shut his mouth when he looked into my eyes. And so, I gave some instructions to the knights as I watched half of the one thousand

mercenaries who first visited the kingdom turn around.

* * *

A mercenary of the Gray Wolf Company ground his teeth as he thought about the eldest son of Leonberg's royal family.

"Fuck it. He's the Crown Prince, but just because he is, does that mean he can tell us to come and go like mongrel dogs?"

He had come a long way, and when he was treated like an uninvited guest, his stomach seemed to boil.

"Shut up. Don't provoke the knights for no reason."

Mercenary Commander Turk got the man in his eyes and ordered him to hold his tongue. However, it wasn't easy for him to endure his rising anger; his face was hot.

"If you kill all those knights, stop-"

"Hear me, pup. Now that we don't have a contract, does that mean I ain't the manager no more? That's very funny and easy, right?"

The mercenary shut his mouth as he heard Turk's fierce voice.

"I don't like this, so don't make me not like you."

"But manager, what do we do from now on?" asked Vice-commander Yols in a soft tone, standing right behind Turk.

"How can you ask that? We do what we've always done," answered Turk. Yols lowered his voice even more.

"Are you really going to do it? I want to give up everything now and go back-"

"You're like a little boy who keeps telling the same story," Turk growled, his voice also accordingly low. "I told you — the world has changed. Didn't you see it in the Empire? Monsters are everywhere. The emperor and the nobles are in a hurry to take care of their own rice bowls, whether or not the villages become empty fields."

A strange heat blazed in Turk's eyes.

"The empire might have some order, but now we're in a country in the continent's corner."

"Leonberg looks much calmer than the Empire. People didn't show signs of anxiety," noted Yols.

"That's because the knights who guided us took us to the best places."

"Leader, let us reconsider. No matter how much I think about it, something doesn't feel good. This country has the Northern Lion, who completely smashed the Imperial Army."

"We've got no work, Yols. It's a difficult time now. Now is when a guy with a wide mouth has to eat. It's a time when you don't get fed if you keep your mouth shut, afraid of some flies getting in."

Vice-commander Yols tried to open his mouth again, but Turk was quicker than him.

"Anyway, have a good talk with the other mercenaries, as I've ordered you. I saw a suitable village on the way here. We get rid of the knights, wait for the other boys to calm down, and then start the business in earnest. If you do well, you'll be able to get a big bite out of the pie, so stop whining."

Yols sighed, knowing he could not argue against those words.

"When I hear you talking, commander, it looks like you've seen another girl you like."

"Maybe because of the war, the men have dried up in each village. The women would be mutually cooperative right now."

"I swear commander, you'll one day get stabbed by a girl's knife."

"In our lives, it would be better to be killed by a beauty's blade rather than a man's sword."

Despite the vice-commander's comments, Turk didn't raise a single eyebrow. Rather, he grabbed his crotch and moved his hips in a serpentine motion. Yols sighed and returned to his seat. Turk glanced around, studying his surroundings.

“Thirty knights and a hundred soldiers.”

The momentum of the knights and soldiers lined up to the left and right was fierce. Even with a quick glance, Turk could see that they were elite troops.

“As expected, the troops seem to be scared by the sudden rampage of monsters following the war.”

However, no matter how elite, their numbers were too few to control the five hundred mercenaries completely.

“I’m so glad I came to Leonberg,” Turk gave a mean laugh.

In fact, from the start, Turk and his mercenary company were never concerned about the fees paid by the Leonbergers. It was bullshit; he couldn’t believe the bluebloods would offer insignificant mercenaries a way to become knights.

They were too quick to dismiss mercenaries, who collected mana in the heart rather than in rings.

“I’m sure they want to use as mana shields or fodder.”

Of course, Turk had no intention of ending his life miserably on the front lines as fodder. Rather, he had greater ambitions.

Turk believed that if he could take advantage of the chaos that has risen around the world, he would be able to make great gains. He believed that if luck was on his side, he could rise above being a trivial mercenary. Turk was hoping that maybe he could rule a small castle.

And now, his plans were beginning after coming to this country on the outskirts. Turk believed this and looked for his opportunity. Then, finally, his chance came.

Halfway on the journey, the knights in charge of monitoring the mercenaries left the procession and returned the way they had come. There were only one hundred soldiers left. Turk looked at Vice-commander Yols. The man nodded, letting Turk know that he was done talking with other mercenaries.

Without hesitation, Turk drew his sword.

Five hundred mercenaries followed him as they pulled forth their blades and rushed the soldiers. The troops didn't even dare think of facing the mercenaries — they ran away.

"What, they weren't elite?"

"If you look at the speed at which they run, they are elite!"

The mercenaries laughed at Leonberg's fleeing soldiers.

"From now on, this is our world!"

The mercenaries stood there mocking the Royal Army's cowardice for a long time; then they began marching along with Turk. They headed in the direction of the nearest town, which had no more than a hundred denizens.

"We will take a break here today, then head to another village I saw tomorrow."

Turk entered the village without any sign of great concern.

"Leader… Something is weird."

"What else are you going to say!"

Turk's face was annoyed, for, when he had been enjoying the pleasant moment and taking his first great step, the vice-commander interrupted with a firm face.

"The soldiers of before…"

"The cowards who didn't even draw their knives and fled right away?"

"I checked, and there were no bodies. They didn't pick them up — none of them died."

"That's because they ran so fast. It's the first time in my life I've ever seen someone running away like that."

"No matter how much I think about it… We drew our blades right next to them, so it's strange that no one died-"

“Yols. Go do some work. If you keep making ominous noises next to me, I will not stand it anymore.”

When Turk growled openly with ill-intent, Yols looked at him, and he did not back down.

“This village is also weird. So many people were here — how can it be so quiet?”

Turk burst into anger after hearing Yols, who usually backed down if scolded.

“It cant’ go on! If we leave a coward like you as the vice commander, our company will become a laughing stock. Starting today, you are stripped of your position as vice-commander. Get somewhere out of my sight before I crush your skull.”

When Yols opened his mouth, trying to say something, some mercenaries ran into him, grabbed him, and dragged him off.

“Tsu. Cry baby.”

Turk, having watched the former vice-commander being dragged away, walked on toward the village entrance.

“I will stay in this village for one day. If you cooperate gently, we have no intention of harming anyone!” shouted Turk after entering the village, then shut his mouth. After a long time, he grinned with eyes full of dark emotions.

“It would’ve been hard to pass through here quietly today, anyway.”

In front of Turk, under the pale moonlight, there stood a woman with white, near-transparent skin, her back turned. Her body was twisted at an oblique angle. She stood with her eyes cast down, wielding a longsword that did not match her slender body.

“Do you have a husband? If so, say goodbye in advance. In a little while, you will be a widow.”

It was at that point that the woman turned and looked straight at the company commander.

“That emblem?”

Turk saw a golden lion patterned upon the woman's chest. But before he could even think rationally about what it was, Turk made eye contact with the woman, and he fell in love.

From the depths of her gentle and soft eyes, indescribable mystical lights were shining, swaying.

Red was the left eye, and yellow was the right.

CHAPTER 256
BLOOM IN DIFFICULTY (2)

There was something about Crown Prince Adrian Leonberger that stimulated the people's curiosity and excitement. He had moved beyond his past notoriety and stigmas, became the savior of the north, and was now considered the future of the kingdom.

Unsurprisingly, when the people of the kingdom gathered, they praised the young hero born into the kingdom until their throats were dry. Then, when they had told all of the Crown Prince's tales, the people again began to speak, this time about the five knights following Prince Adrian.

"Chief of the Balahard family and renowned as the kingdom's shield, the first Duke in the kingdom for nearly a hundred years, Hertzog Norden, and acclaimed supporter of the Crown Prince, Vincent Balahard."

"Arwen Kirgayen, the Steel Knight, widely known for her swordsmanship and knightly nature, a rare Master in her early twenties."

"Bernardo Eli, a descendant of the kingdom's finest knights, who gained notoriety as the scion of a fallen high family, but who made great strides in the recent imperial war and in the monster extermination of the past year."

"A young man who has been named as the next palace knight commander by Count Schmilde Stuttgart, Carls Ulrich, renowned leader of palace knights, who became famous for his graceful appearance and outstanding elegance."

"Adelia Bavaria, a genius knight who has proven her mastery by attaining the title of champion in just a few years after being a maid who had never clutched a sword."

All of them were people who gained fame incredibly quickly, and all were young enough to have great futures to look forward to. But among them, Adelia Bavaria was a figure veiled in mystery.

All that was known about her was that she had originally been a maid, was then

recognized as a knight by the Crown Prince, and was widely ridiculed with the stigma of being his concubine until she received the title of champion.

From tales by Carls Ulrich, who had seen less combat than the other knights following the prince, and through the maids and servants of aristocrats traveling to and from the royal palace, Adelia's graceful appearance and serious and noble character became widely known.

It was not known exactly what kind of woman Adelia was.

If one listened to the maids of the First Palace, who once worked with her, they greatly cherished her elevated status. But if one accidentally met a northern knight or soldier and asked them about Adelia, their faces turned pale.

"She's gentle, sensitive, and good — but scary, cruel, and fearless."

Sometimes, even if people managed to get lucky and unlock a northerner's tongue, they then had to listen to a tale filled with contradictions that were difficult to understand.

"A good woman who can't kill a single fly."

"A cruel woman who values all life like a fly's."

Then, in the end, people came up with two conclusions that couldn't coexist at all, and they could not figure out what was true.

Some chattering enthusiasts gave Adelia the nickname 'Cruel Angel.'

"Exactly!"

"Who thought that up? It's weird!"

The soldiers in the north who heard the strange nickname strongly sympathized with it, punching their knees or slapping each other's backs as they talked about the moniker's aptness.

When it became known that even Adelia's master, the Crown Prince, had heard her nickname and admired its suitability, the populace began to call her 'Adelia Bavaria, the cruel angel.'

However, only a few of the people who called her that truly knew the nickname's meaning.

And now, Turk and five hundred mercenaries who had wandered into the kingdom were on the verge of being included among those select few.

Of course, they didn't know what Adelia was at first.

"To find such a treasure in a corner like this."

"Yeah. The other things seem normal, but the eyes and skin are awesome."

Turk and the mercenaries could only admire Adelia Bavaria and her differently-shining eyes, saying she was a rare attraction within the world.

"I can't bear it. Kill them all, I'm taking her with me."

Eventually, Turk was so fascinated by the cruel light in Adelia's eyes that he thought of taking her by force.

"Kill all the men, elders, and children. Just keep the women alive."

"Then those women-

"Do whatever you feel like. I just need this girl."

The mercenaries cheered at Turk's words.

"Leader! Look at her clothes! It's the Leonberger crest! Maybe she's a royal woman!"

Only Yols, once vice-commander but now critic, gave a strong warning.

"You shut up. How great if she's a princess of this country!"

"Let's hide and grow our forces! Let's build our own kingdom! If you touch that woman, Leonberg's army will move on us!"

"Ha, really… Yols, you're a little bitch to the end. Even the Empire was facing trouble and struggled to stop us, so how can this country have the troops to pursue us! Right now, they could only spare a hundred cowards and thirty knights! You always

pretend to be so smart, Yols — I don't know why!"

"Something's weird about this! Please, leader!"

Yols continued to scream, but Turk wasn't listening.

"What will we do, boys?! Before we flee, let's let them pay for it! It's okay if we run away, since when the hell have we thought and worried about the future!"

The mercenaries' spirit had been stifled for a while when they heard the army might chase them; now their spirits soared again.

Turk, who watched the men heading further into the village, turned to the woman again.

"The more I see you, the more I know you'll be most fascinating."

Holding his crotch, Turk stepped forward, and the woman suddenly shed tears.

"Don't be scared, pretty. It doesn't hurt."

Turk said that she was even attractive when crying, and he laughed insidiously as he continued to rub his hand over his pants. He didn't know what those tears meant.

"I promise, serve me with sincerity and follow me as your master-"

Turk, who had been talking in a world of his own, experienced a strange sense of incongruity that made him shut up.

His vision was somehow blurry, distorted as he looked around. He saw that that the officers who had been heading into the inner village on his order had somehow halted, stiffened like stone statues.

"What are you doing-" Turk spoke in annoyance, but before his words were done, he heard the sound of something falling. He turned his head and widened his eyes as he saw a head roll across the ground.

'Hwaak!'

A headless body, right next to Turk, spouted blood as it collapsed with a thump. That

was the beginning- ‘Tuk~ Degur’ dozens of heads rolled to the ground as blood fountained from dozens of corpses.

“What is this…?”

Turk look at the decapitated heads with a vague face.

“I never want to hurt anyone.”

Then, there came the soft sound of crying. Turk turned his head.

“But I hate being useless to his Highness.”

The woman was there, with a face as if she would sink down and weep right away; her bloody sword hung in her grip, pointing to the ground.

“That’s why my heart hurts.”

The woman looked at the bodies with a gloomy face. “But…”

After a while, she turned to face Turk again. “Not as much as I thought.”

“What the hell do you mean! No, what did you do!” Turk shouted.

“His Highness’s words were right.”

However, the woman continued to talk to herself as if she didn’t care about Turk.

“He’s always right. There’s nothing wrong with what he said. You must not doubt his words.”

The woman lifted her sword.

“So it’s the same again this time.”

Her tone was full of grief as her weeping began to subside.

“If his Highness says that you are beasts, not men…”

Then, at a certain moment, the woman’s face became insidious, like that of snake

hissing.

“Then, you are beasts.”

Little by little, the red and yellow lights that flickered deep within Adelia’s eyes grew brighter.

“And I’ve cut into non-humans so much that it’s become boring.”

Turk felt cramped as if choking — the woman’s shining gaze was nailed on him.

Instinct told Turk that the two lights he had considered mysterious and beautiful a little while ago were actually the eyes of a nocturnal predator crouched in the shadows of the dark forest. His body responded to this instinct immediately, a habit that had been hardened in him over many years.

Turk’s hand moved toward his sword’s hilt, and mana from his heart flowed to his hand in an instant. However, neither his hand nor his mana reached their destination.

‘Sasak!’

Turk felt a subtle pressure passing through his shoulder, and when he realized what it was, it was too late. Turk gazed down. There lay a chunk of hairy meat that had been someone’s arm. Turk, who was staring at the piece of flesh, suddenly saw his body. There was an empty spot where his shoulder had been cleanly severed, and blood was pumping out rapidly.

“Where is my arm?” Turk mumbled like a madman, picking up the limb that had fallen to the ground.

‘Sasak!’

Just then, a golden flash struck, as if having awaited this moment.

‘Tuk!’

In the next instant, Turk’s remaining arm plopped to the ground. With a blank face, Turk looked at the two limbs that had once been an indispensable part of his life but were now obsolete chunks of meat.

“Ah?”

He opened his mouth, and his speech sounded dull at first.

“Urghh.” It quickly became a pained groan-

“Ahhhh!” and finally turned into a terrible scream.

“My arm! My aaa—aa-arm!” Turk screamed.

“When I cleanse my sword,” the woman whispered, “blood into a river flows, and the flesh enriches the land.”

At that moment, a brilliant golden aura covered the entire area, then its light faded away. All that remained were corpses crushed into unrecognizable shapes and Turk’s own body.

“Waah,” Turk muttered as he sank to the ground, coming to a sit as his mouth trembled. He sighted a corpse that had half its body missing. It had been vice-commander Yols. One side of the head, cleaved in half just like the body, was facing Turk.

‘I swear commander, you’ll one day get stabbed by a girl’s knife.’

What Yols had told Turk all his life sounded in his ears like a hallucination.
“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!” he screamed.

‘Waschack!’

In the next moment, a golden flash of light came out of nowhere and cut his scream short.

‘Duk,’ Turk’s head rolled over the ground.

* * *

“This time, we won’t get the chance to go out,” a ranger who was looking at the village from a distance said jokingly.

“The villagers will have to find another place to live.”

“Yeah, all the houses are gonna collapse.”

The rangers joked with each other, but it was clear that they pretended to be cheerful; their faces were drawn and pale. Eventually, they stopped making meaningless jokes and shut their mouths.

As their surroundings became quiet, the screams from afar became clearer.

“Help me!”

“Please forgive me!”

The petitions and shouts of those beset by terror were intermixed. However, the pleas and cries soon turned into screams of despair, and even those grew quiet as time passed.

“It must be over,” one ranger said after a while.

“It can’t be over. His Highness was very insistent! Don’t move until it’s over!”

“To be precise, he told us to stand back and watch the situation, even if it was over. He said it would be better if we waited for Sir Adelia to return first.”

“Yes! Then, we have to wait some more.”

The rangers shut their mouths for a while and then started talking again, finding the silence too hard to bear.

“But are you sure there was no one left in the town?”

“We made sure. There was no one. And even if there was, they won’t be there now.”

“Don’t say such things!”

“It’s true. Look — who can survive that?”

“Ugh. I won’t see it. I can’t see it.”

These weren’t mere words; the rangers’ eyes looked everywhere other than at the village.

However, because they were on a mission, they couldn't completely turn their heads away; sometimes, they had to look in that direction.

"Uh- It's all over," said one of the rangers who took turns to watch the village. "Now. Go."

The rangers headed into the village reluctantly, finding dead mercenaries scattered around and within.

"It's hell."

The rangers stepped lightly as they avoided corpses and blood puddles, their faces shocked. However, the dead were too many, and a lot of blood flowed from them. So, the rangers' leather boots quickly became stained red. They waded through the pools of blood and reached the village center, finally meeting the one who had caused such carnage.

Between piles of crushed corpses, a blood-soaked woman stood in the dark.

'Gulp,' one of the rangers swallowed his spit.

'Shh' Just then, Adelia turned her head, facing the rangers with her multicolored pupils.

After a moment of silence-

"Balahard Rangers!" Friendlies! Allies!" the rangers shouted all at once, even throwing their beloved crossbows into the gore as they desperately raised their hands.

CHAPTER 257
BLOOM IN DIFFICULTY (3)

“The moment our eyes met, my skin crawled! I thought that perhaps I would die that day.”

It had been a few days already, and the ranger spoke of the time he had met Adelia, his face pale as if it had just happened. He had come as a messenger to the fort, way ahead of the main contingent.

“I don’t know, but some of the lads might have soiled their pants.”

I sympathized with that feeling.

A woman standing in the middle of a pile of crushed corpses, and no ordinary woman, but one with a coat of blood all over her body and on her longsword, with bits of flesh still clinging to the blade — how terrifying it had to be. And worse, it was Adelia Bavaria.

The rangers had fought countless battles alongside her; they knew how terrifying she was. Adelia was the Sword Master who would shed tears even while her sword tore through hard oak and leather like pieces of paper.

Once Adelia’s eyes turn, creatures around her perish as she becomes a berserker who does not stop until the rivers of blood run dry. In the battles Adelia fought, only blood and chunks of meat remained from bodies that had been rendered unrecognizable. It was said that even the strongest rangers would faint after witnessing the horror.

On the other hand, there were the lunatics who cheered more enthusiastically for Adelia’s nature, but they were the exception.

The majority of rangers loved Adelia, who was good and gentle, but at the same time avoided going on the battlefield with her.

How scary it must have been for them to meet her in such a yard of madness while

her battle energies have not subsided. Even if they hadn't known this, Adelia's gaze must have been similar to a predator's looking at its prey, for her traits of [Butcher] and [War Mania] were currently in full bloom.

At that moment, the rangers must have felt like frogs facing a snake, or like rabbits in front of a lion.

"If Adelia does that, always wait for her to come back to her senses."

"We tried to do that, but we were a little worried."

"You guys were worried about Adelia?"

"Like rats worried about a cat," the ranger sighed, his face filled with regret.

I pitied the man, for he still hadn't cleared out the horrors of that day. I asked him what had happened next.

"We kept crying out that we were on the same side — my throat got sore. But, instead of lowering her sword, Lady Adelia gripped it tighter. We thought that it was all going wrong. We moved first, at that moment!"

"What did you do in that instant?"

"We all took something from our pockets at once. The moment she looked at it, Lady Adelia's eyes returned to their original state, as if they had always been like that. She sheathed her sword, and it felt like she was more dead than alive."

The ranger sounded discouraged as if it felt creepy just thinking about it.

"How?! What did you show her?" I urged the ranger to answer me, thinking that I might hopefully find clues as to how to control Adelia's madness whenever I was absent.

"It was your personal belongings."

"My belongings?"

"There was a handkerchief embroidered with your Highness's crest. There was even a combat glove." The ranger had at first been talking proudly; now his tone had

gradually crept into a whisper.

“My handkerchief. My gloves. What else?”

“There was underwear and a lot of other things.”

“So, a hundred rangers pulled out my stuff at the same time, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So- When did you steal my stuff?” I asked in a growl, and the ranger quickly created an excuse.

“That… Before going out, after listening to the briefing, we identified something that could work. And we took it only because the situation was urgent-”

“You knew that this was a job that required speed. That’s why I told you to come straight after the order was given. Was my order not delivered properly?”

The ranger froze as he faced my cold voice, then cried out, “No! It was delivered properly! It was an urgent mission, so we scooped up the cheap shit and came running right away!”

“Okay. In such an urgent situation, you went into my lodgings, and came out with my stuff? All one hundred of you?”

“That… So-”

“Was I in my room, then?”

Hearing my words, the ranger bowed his head.

“I sinned! I’m sorry!” He apologized for his immorality.

“Explain,” I growled as I stared at the ranger’s bowed head. He closed his eyes and explained the situation.

“It’s… It’s like a talisman.”

His explanation was so absurd that I started laughing.

“Good things happen when we have your Highness’s personal belongings.”

“Hah, that doesn’t sound like anything real.”

“Really! Some have really worked!”

I just laughed as I watched the ranger continuously shouting bullshit that I would never believe.

“No. Why the hell does Jordan not manage his rangers?” I mused.

The ranger had a strange expression as he looked at me.

“Surely…”

“Company Commander Jordan did it first.”

I stopped laughing.

“Do you know why Commander Balahard allows such ridiculous superstitions to spread among the rangers?”

This time, the ranger averted his gaze, then turned away from me. As I watched him, my face twisted into a frown.

“You must be crazy. Even Vincent?”

The expression of having one’s foot crushed by an invisible ax was used in cases such as these.

“To tell your Highness the truth, the commander has the most.”

Thankfully, the ranger spoke without me having to question him, adding the final piece to the puzzle.

My head began to hurt; I didn’t want to talk anymore.

“If you want me to leave all you guys alone, first of all, grab the one who took my underwear and drag him in front of me.”

“Shall I take him alive? Or will I kill him and then bring him back?” the ranger responded, his face as sly a corrupt priest when offering a sacrifice.

“Half-living, half-dead,” I replied casually as I touched my chin, then chased the ranger out. Alone again, I awaited the return of the troops with a terrible feeling. Half a day had passed, though it felt like a year when I received the news that Adelia, the other knights, and the rangers have reached the fortress.

I went straight to the gate, and when I stepped outside it, the first thing I saw was about a hundred tents. For the five hundred mercenaries who I had kept and the thousand who had arrived a few days ago, it was a temporary residence. The mercenaries saw me and ran out of their tents to see what was going on.

Then they followed my gaze, looking across the plains. When they saw the returning troops, they began to wonder among themselves.

“What? Where are they coming from?”

“Did they go to defeat monsters?”

Ignoring the noise they were making, I watched quietly as the troops reached the fort, still a hundred yards from the gate. Adelia was at their forefront. As she walked to the gate with drooping shoulders and a thick cloak wrapped around her, she saw me and widened her eyes.

A smile quickly spread over her gloomy face, and a lot of joy entered her eyes. Adelia’s face seemed as if she would come running to me right away. Actually, she did almost skip to me. As her strides increased in length, the cloak wrapped around her flared open, and its red-stained hem was revealed.

“Isn’t that blood?”

“It looks like blood.”

The mercenaries quickly noticed the nature of the stain and began to mumble.

Meanwhile, Adelia was running toward me.

She stopped right in front of me with a reddened face, her shoulders moving with every breath. Her body was that of a Sword Master who has reached completion;

there was no way that she could be short of breath just because of running a few yards.

Adelia straightened her shoulders and turned her gaze straight at me.

'Chuck'

She pounded her fist upon her chest, holding her back straight.

"I, Adelia Bavaria, report that all are dead and none of our forces injured. I return with one hundred and thirty troops. The mission is completed."

Adelia spoke like a knight. It was really awkward, which made it even more unique. I forgot about the smell of blood slamming into my nose as I unwittingly raised my hand. It moved toward Adelia's head.

'Strt'

Then I suddenly stopped and looked at Adelia. She looked at me with a calm face, when she would have cried and lamented at moments like these in the past. I withdrew my outstretched hand. In order to not waste Adelia's efforts in reporting the mission's completion to me as a knight, I spoke to her in a professional tone.

"Good work. I'll hear a detailed report later."

I also dealt with her by keeping my back straight.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Adelia gave a small bow and stepped back.

No matter how daring she looked, I still had to put up with the fact that I wanted to stroke her hair.

"Hgmm," I coughed for no reason and turned my head. Thirty knights and ninety-nine rangers were looking at me. The battle had been fought by Adelia alone, but looking at their faces, they looked far more tired.

"Everyone worked hard. You can go back and have a good rest."

At my words, the knights and rangers gave their salutes with rather subdued gestures.

At first glance, these didn't seem like the men of Winter Castle, who never hesitated to draw their swords and rove across the battlefield. But this was only for a while.

The knights and rangers were conscious of the gazing mercenaries who had run from their tents, so stretched their shoulders and refined their posture. Their disorganized appearance disappeared in an instant.

"Move!"

On the command of the knight at their front, the knights and rangers passed me by and entered the fortress gate — marching on with straight legs, as if they had no worries.

Behind them came a cart full of loot.

"Uh? That's the gray wolf mercenaries' weapons!"

"There's the flag of the Blue Lark Company!"

"There's also the shadow banner of the Leopard Mercenaries!"

The mercenaries started shouting one after the other as they recognized the tattered military flags that had negligently been shoved onto one side of the cart.

"Why are these-"

At that moment, all the murmuring mercenaries shut their mouths as one. Then, with wide eyes, they looked at the backs of the troops who had already passed the gate, and their expressions were hard like stone. Maybe, they would soon get mad about what happened to the erstwhile owners of the loot piled up under the flags.

There was a heavy silence, their trembling eyes filled with anxiety, and an uncomfortable agitation spread through their ranks.

When their negative emotions reached a peak, I went to stand before them and said, "Keep in mind that our kingdom will never be tolerant toward those who covet our land, people, and wealth."

No matter how insignificant my words were, a few quick-witted warriors understood what I was saying and groaned.

“They don’t like spoiled dogs here. It looks like these ones were caught trying to steal again.”

“That’s why he wanted to filter out all the bad guys and kick them out, and after all that, they still had an accident.”

When some of the mercenaries spoke, those around them also understood the situation and changed their expressions.

“Hey!”

“I like it! These bastards were too sick to be called mercenaries!”

“I knew they would do something like this at any time!”

Eventually, some of them spat on the ground and even cursed the dead mercenaries.

Apparently, the notoriety of the slain sellswords was quite high. Warriors spoke, saying that they had been cursing these bandits and wishing for their deaths for a long time.

“Wait a minute! So, did Leonberg’s army annihilate them with only a hundred soldiers and thirty knights?”

“But how? There were no dead or injured men among them…”

The random question someone had thrown into the crowd was an astonishing one and quickly spread among the mercenaries.

“Apart from the others — they killed the Gray Wolves, especially those demons Turk and Yols?”

“Crazy… What the hell are these monsters?”

“I heard that Leonberg prevailed against the several times larger Imperial Army. The rumors weren’t exaggerated.”

Even if late, their admiration for us blossomed, and I was satisfied. In fact, the deed had not been done by a hundred soldiers nor thirty knights but by Adelia alone.

Of course, the results would not have changed even if Adelia had not fought.

Having survived countless battles, the Winter Knights were war veterans. They would easily overcome that many mercenaries, no matter how crowded the field of battle.

The same was true of the rangers, who had been forged in battles against orc warriors.

They had felled countless imperial knights and were the elite among the elite who still had enough spirit left to laugh and suffer. They were not worth three mercenaries each, but four.

Moreover, these were mercenaries whose slaughter victims had mainly been powerless people with no battle experience. I continued to look at the mercenaries' traits as I activated [Judging] and [Third Ear].

While many mercenaries had admired the kingdom's power in defeating a force three times larger without casualties, no one was mourning the deaths and expressing hostility to the kingdom.

If such as them were here, they could be from the same companies as those who were killed.

I pretended to be indifferent as I glanced over the mercenaries.

Even though my ability was secret, I couldn't rule out the possibility that there would be warriors like them mixed into the crowd, managing to avoid the eyes of [Judging].

As expected, I noticed some uncomfortable signs on the faces of some mercenaries. I remembered their features and instructed the rangers to watch them closely. Then, I headed straight through the fort's gate, and Adelia followed me.

After walking for a while, I suddenly looked back.

Adelia was gazing at me with her consistent face, her good and gentle face that made it hard to believe she had taken hundreds of lives a few days ago.

Still, I couldn't help but ask, "Are you okay?"

Adelia said she was okay with a surprisingly embarrassed face. At first glance, she looked no different than before, but I knew her well. Adelia's soul was harder than before. She was different — she was already a great knight.

I suddenly remembered the first time Adelia had spoken her [Poem of Subjugation] before me, swearing to me, "If I become a knight, I will live as your Highness's sword."

That was Adelia's Muhunshi poem; her pledge.

"I merely punished nonhuman things for your Highness's sake, and I will continue to do so without hesitation if your Highness wishes."

And at this moment, her oath was fulfilled.

The moment I realized it- 'Hwaak!'

Light flared into being.

CHAPTER 258
BLOOM IN DIFFICULTY (4)

A brilliant corona of light embraced Adelia. Her face, bathed in radiance, looked terribly reverent and noble. It was like long ago, in the ruins of the giants' castle, when the founder of the Bavaria family completed the first verse of [Poetry of Sudden Change].

However, it wasn't exactly the same.

While Agnes Bavaria's dance poem was a song of hope dedicated to all suffering humans, Adelia's was solely a song of devotion and worship toward her master. I was still looking at Adelia when a messenger voice I hadn't heard for a time whispered to me.

It explained what I would get from the poem's effects, which was finally perfected after achieving the condition. I don't know whether we could feel each others' existence no matter where we were. But I did know that, in some cases, feelings and willpower could indeed be shared. If certain conditions were fulfilled, it was indeed possible to sing a dance poem with separate verses.

The message didn't really get into my head, but it had gone something like that. The only thing that mattered to me right now was the presence of my dear Adelia. Because of me, she unwillingly walked upon the road of knighthood.

She was a simple woman who was far happier when she stood behind me instead of unleashing her sword, even while being one of the best knights in the kingdom.

I couldn't take my eyes off Adelia. Her dignified appearance was so dazzling. She stood still, her eyes closed, with her sword basking in radiant light.

I was impressed, and the tip of my nose started itching.

Until I first saw Adelia for what she was, I would never have imagined that we would be in this relationship. At the time, she was only a poor girl who suffered from an idiot prince's abuse; she would jerk her shoulders in surprise at the slightest sound.

I felt the strong bonds between Adelia's soul and mine. It was as if we had been one from the very beginning — as if we had never been separate. A kind of fullness I had never felt before uplifted my soul.

The light faded, yet the fullness that filled one side of my chest did not disappear.

Just then, Adelia opened her eyes.

Even now, when the aura of light that had surrounded her body disappeared, the golden light flickering in her eyes remained. And then, even it faded away completely.

I could see that there was a sense of embarrassment in Adelia after the changes had occurred.

"Your Highness," Adelia called to me.

I quietly nodded. The doubts and shame that had been so strong in her eyes quickly subsided, and she, in turn, gave off a bright smile.

Then, in a clear voice, Adelia once more spoke the promise she had made that day.

"I will live the rest of my life only as your Highness's sword."

"Adelia Bavaria offers her sword."

Her curt words became poetry, became an oath.

[—]Adelia Bavaria's dance poem [Poetry of Subordination] changes[—]

[—][Poetry of Subordination] becomes [Poetry of Oath][—]

Her oath once again became a new poem, experiencing a truly ironic fate.

A dance poem written by a woman who had no desire to become a knight was now a song about a knight's oath. However, it wasn't all that surprising: Adelia's ancestor, Agnes Bavaria, was a knight beyond knights, a great hero once called the Queen of Knights.

No, it wasn't surprising for Agnes's descendant to make a true knightly oath. Of course, considering Adelia's nature, it might seem a bit surprising, but it didn't

matter at all.

No matter what poem she formed, even if it was one so ominous as to be catastrophic, to me she would always be my dear Adelia.

It was like that in the past, it was so now, and it shall be so in the future. Knowing of that constant loyalty, I also looked at Adelia with trusting eyes.

In that moment-

[—]There is a new verse in [Poem of Dominance], which before had only a name and no verses[—]

A message now popped into my mind.

“I sing of the prince’s grace as I dedicate my sword and soul.”

‘I will make you a knight, so be brave, faithful, and loyal,’ was a phrase that I wouldn’t have thought of, but as soon as I heard Adelia’s song, it came to my mind. I laughed brightly.

“Thanks, Adelia.”

She also laughed with me without knowing why I laughed. We looked at each other for some time as we laughed. I then gave a downward glance.

“Your Highness?” Adelia, staring at my face, came to understand the meaning of my glance and knelt before me one moment later. But still, I saw that she didn’t understand exactly what I was trying to do; her face was full of questions.

I drew Twilight, and standing in front of Adelia, I raised my sword high, twisted the blade flat, and tapped it upon her shoulders.

Then I looked straight at Adelia with a blank face and sang [Poem of Dominance].

“I make you a knight. Be courageous, faithful, and loyal.”

Adelia’s eyes stretched wide.

“Well, your Highness…”

Her eyes filled with tears. She smiled and lifted her chin. “For my entire future, you are my sword.”

“I will be a great knight worthy to serve in your Highness’s name.”

I nodded. No more, no less — it was enough for Adelia to remain as she was.

“Well, your Highness…”

Adelia looked at me, her voice trembling as she spoke and then shut her lips tight. In the past, tears would have burst from her right away. As I watched Adelia hold back her tears, she stood up and straightened her back. An arrogant emotion arose from my heart, feeling both sad and unique — Boldness.

Was this how a father felt toward his mature daughter? Does Siorin’s heart when he looks at Arwen feel like this?

However, although the emotions were similar, there was a decisive difference between Siorin and me: I have already raised countless knights and watched them leave my hands.

Regret was nothing to me. I knew it; I definitely thought so.

The tip of my nose was itching a lot today. I didn’t know if it was because of feeling the first true emotion in this human body, or because I had always felt guilty about Adelia. All that was certain was that she was no longer a sore finger to me; she had mastered herself.

I rubbed the tip of my nose, unable to stop myself. As I rubbed and soothed my frown, I suddenly felt a sense of incongruity. Our surroundings were strangely quiet.

I felt countless gazes that seemed to prick over my skin. I turned my head.

Almost all of the troops, both from above and below the fortress walls, were looking at Adelia. Even the mercenaries were looking our way through the wide-open gate.

There was Vincent; there were Eli and Carls.

Vincent looked at me in a somewhat apologetic manner, as if I was asking him what he was doing here. What dissatisfied me was Eli, who only grunted and stood with

his mouth agape. At first glance, Carls looked the same, but when I looked closely, I saw that Carls had a regretful face, which I did not understand.

Jordan and the rangers were grinning and laughing, loving the entire event very much.

I watched them all, then turned my head back to Adelia.

Her entire face may have been red with shame, but she did not lower her shoulders, even while facing the gaze of so many people. Rather, Adelia had quite a solid appearance as she stood with her back straight.

It felt so wonderful and lovely to look at her.

It would have been even more so if it weren't for the dark red bloodstains on her chest and sleeves. I reminded Adelia that she had just returned from a gritty mission, and I ordered her to take a break.

Instead of rejecting my order, Adelia entered the fortress, saying she would get a clean dress and then see me again. She walked proudly, conscious of the surrounding gazes.

Watching her, I laughed and smiled, and glanced at Vincent and the others, urging them to follow me.

Vincent and Carls understood my intent just by looking at my eyes and walked after me. But I had sent the eye signal to three; only two sets of footfalls were following me.

I looked back.

There were Vincent and Carls standing right behind me, and over their shoulders, far away, there was the dolt Eli, staring our way.

"Why aren't you coming again?"

Eli frowned, looked around, then raised his finger and pointed at himself.

"Yes, Eli. You."

Only then did he hurriedly jog up and fall in behind me. “Next time, tell me to follow you.”

I sighed as I heard the guy grunt, and then we started moving again.

* * *

“What was that light?”

Once we were in the fort’s council room, Vincent asked me a question.

I gave a rough explanation of Adelia’s new dance poem, and hearing this, everyone was impressed.

“Sir Adelia has woven her knight’s oath into a poem,” Vincent expressed his pure admiration.

“The knight’s oath…” Somehow, the voice that faltered was Eli’s.

“For the first time, I am envious of mana hearts, not rings.”

The unusually depressed voice was Carls’s.

I grinned and burst into laughter as I enjoyed the various reactions. Still laughing, I called Carls.

“Yes, your Highness?”

“Get on your knees.”

Carls, his eyes wide open, knelt in front of me. He was so surprised that his knee thumped onto the floor. He was unknowingly expressing regret a while ago; his look quickly turned to one of anticipation. Looking at that face, I felt like I was going to burst into laughter. But instead of laughing, I drew Twilight and tapped Carls’ shoulders.

Then, in a solemn voice, I recited the verse of [Poem of Dominance], just as I had done with Adelia.

“I make you a knight. Be courageous, faithful, and loyal.”

“I will do my best!”

At least Carls’ solid answer was the same as before, but the results were abnormal.

‘Hwaak!’

A soft light flashed from my body and surrounded Carls. The three rings in his body began to resonate with my heart mana. In such a shocking situation, Carls raised his head and looked at me.

“You are my shield.” Instead of explaining things, I spoke curtly and turned my head.

Eli, also kneeling before me, seemed to subtly anticipate that I would come to him.

I merely passed him by, and Vincent smiled as he met my gaze.

“A duke’s knees are too precious.”

Countering my words, Vincent knelt before me without any hesitation.

I sang [Poem of Dominance] and accepted Vincent as my knight.

“You are my final wall.”

Vincent looked at the light surrounding his body as if it was marvellous and then stood. Even then, Eli was looking at me, still on his knees. His face, so utterly confused, looked ridiculous. I wondered if I would give it more time, but decided instead to stop playing around.

“Bernardo Eli.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

I tapped Twilight over Eli’s shoulder, with him responding unnecessarily excited. And via the [Poem of Dominance], I declared to the world that he was my knight. Eli raised his head and looked at my lips with anticipation.

“You are my,” I said solemnly, looking at him. “You are…”

However, I could not finish my words. My mind was blank.

“You are my-” I hurriedly said, and then grew silent, unable to form the next words; all as I watched Eli lick his lips.

“You are my…”

His eyes and expression were so overwhelming that I looked around me desperately.

Then, after a while, I finally looked back at him and said, “You’re my knight.”

Eli’s facial muscles wriggled. He wasn’t smiling or crying, and with such a strange expression, he looked straight up at me.

Then he asked me after a while, “Is that the answer?”

I didn’t respond.

“The other people are swords and shields and walls, but I’m the only one who’s just a knight?”

No, I couldn’t answer Eli at all.

“You’re not really much of-” Eli tried to spew out his resentment of me, but before finishing his words, a dazzling flash entwined him.

I glanced at Eli, who was bathed in light. Then I looked at Vincent and Carls, saying, “When Arwen returns, she will also take the oath.”

They both asked me a question.

“What the hell is this light?”

“Why are we being knighted again?”

I answered them in a somewhat supportive voice. “It’s not like a simple knight’s oath. It’s an act that has a much greater meaning than that. Okay, so to speak…”

CHAPTER 259
BLOOM IN DIFFICULTY (5)

“It’s a soul vow.”

It was a pledge that was made with both parties’ souls as collateral.

“You mean our souls?”

Vincent and the others frowned as they heard the word. It was uncommon to say that a pledge was made at the risk of one’s soul.

There was nothing too strange about it, simply put, the vows of knighthood the knights of today make are not the same as the knightly oaths of past centuries.

Accumulating mana in the heart to achieve great karma and reach a high rank was a terrible process. It could be undermined at any time by the nature of one’s achievements, especially if they were a pretentious mirror of the great acts of the old knights, who did not take promises lightly. Of course, those knights cherished their oaths and lived by them no matter what.

Nevertheless, not all knights spoke the truth or upheld their oaths with their lives. Sometimes, there were those unwilling to undermine their own achievements for greater gain. Still, there were oaths that those without honor could not break: oaths toward a king.

The monarchs of the past used the souls of knights as collateral for their vows, putting shackles on the necks of those who could not be trusted.

“If the promise is broken, those who achieved great karma and spirit lose all of it, and those with low karma and spirit can have their souls damaged.”

Because they could not dare violate their vows, such knights could not cause great harm to humanity. And so, the king bound those who were not trusted and truthful, and he did so with soul vows. Everyone’s faces hardened as they heard my words.

They weren't afraid of the terrible consequences of breaking their oaths, but they were saddened by it. Their eyes spoke to me: 'Do I have to do this?' 'Wasn't it enough for us to trust each other?'

Perhaps they thought I did not believe in them because I made them vow their souls as collateral without explanation.

Of course, it was a misunderstanding. I knew that these knights would not betray me and that they would rush into battle with me without any hesitation.

"Do you think everything I said was just words?" Eli asked as he looked at me with a sad face, looking as if I had accused him of something.

Even though Vincent and Carls had different expressions, the emotions they revealed were all the same. They were really easy-to-understand guys, and that's why I was happy that they existed.

I spoke in a low tone.

"It means that such an effect exists, but I didn't say it's the only effect."

Then, to correct the misunderstanding, I explained to them what a true soul vow was.

"Just because all of you have made pledges with your souls as collateral doesn't mean that every vow is the same."

Some oaths were made under coercion, while others were done voluntarily.

In the former eventuality, only one side offers their soul as collateral, while in the latter case, both parties offer their souls in the oath — just like we had done now.

"It isn't a light matter to bind souls from both parties. For good or bad, or for better or worse, it affects both people. So if one person accumulates bad karma, the other will not be free from its effects and influence."

"Ah!" Eli exclaimed as he heard my words. Even when the world had forgotten dance poems and treated mana hearts like cheap tricks, the Eli family had consistently insisted on mana hearts and Muhunshi. As their descendant, Eli understood the meaning of my explanation.

However, Vincent and Carls barely understood the workings of Muhunshi, so their faces were still doubt-filled.

“In simple terms, it means that if we do something wrong, his High Highness’s power might be lessened.”

Only after hearing Eli’s explanation did Carls and Vincent’s eyes widen as they realized how vital a soul vow was to a mana heart knight.

“Why take such a risk…”

They had been sad a while ago; now they looked at me with worry. They were nervous about what effect their actions would have on me.

Looking at their faces, I just smiled and said, “I did it because I believe in you.”

Carls trembled as he looked at me. Meanwhile, Bernardo Eli smiled, grinning widely.

However, Vincent’s expression worsened.

“That’s not an answer. I mean, what will your Highness gain by taking such personal risks?”

He even accused me of careless behavior, asking what the real reason was for me taking the risk of making soul vows in the first place.

But I knew I wasn’t acting rashly.

“In the past, the kings gathered the most reliable, the most brilliant, and the most promising knights and shared their souls with them.”

I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, only putting it off due to my lack of ability.

“Therefore, the knights who shared their souls with a king were able to employ more than their own skill, and they gained karma that, alone, they could not dare to accumulate. And those who gained such karma gathered together and reached a higher place.”

The indomitable knight Agnes, the powerful wyvern knights of the Sky Blade’s family, and numerous other knights who followed their king.

“The world called them Templars.”

That was the beginning of the Templars, and they were the most powerful swords and shields humans ever had. I firmly believed that because they were there, humanity was able to win the war against so many different species.

I hoped it would be the same now. I looked at those who stood before me.

Dear Vincent; Bernardo Eli, who was childish but swiftly growing up; Carls, who follows me in a consistent manner, and absent Adelia, who considers my word as truth, and who reassured me more than anyone present.

They were my newly-born knights, the knights who had never ceased to be my pillars.

It would be enough to battle with them, to get through the calamities that have come upon the world, to defeat great enemies that I cannot fight alone — to reach transcendence.

“That’s why I shared in the soul vow with you guys.”

Vincent was silent.

He no longer rebuked me for being frivolous, nor expressed concern about what might happen. He just parted his lips several times, then shut them. The same was true of Carls and Eli: one pretended to be calm, while the other had quietly turned up the tips of his mouth to form an unsightly grin.

Their expressions were different, but their emotions seemed surprisingly similar.

Their faces tried to suppress the overwhelming emotion, but I saw they couldn’t stand it. As I watched them, I was filled with feelings as well.

If others were here, maybe one of the many knights existing in the world could be added, but so great were the Templars before me that I did not see the need to add others.

The title was completely different for the Templars of this era, who have simply been given the name as a knightly order.

Through me, Eli and Adelia will be able to recite verses that are beyond their current karma and spirit. Vincent, Carls, and Arwen will be further enhanced and employed to greater effect during the war.

I, too, will share the burden with them and be able to employ martial arts that cannot be fully used with my current abilities.

And above all else, it was important to know that the karma achieved by the Templars would be evenly extended to all. Of course, knights gathered together by oaths had existed in the past, and they too had achieved great singular karma, sharing in the benefits equally.

In fact, the Wyvern Knights had shared some of the power of [Poetry of the Sky] with Umbert, and the Royal Knights who climbed Mount Seori with the king had made one of the short verses of [Poem of the Dragon Slayer] their own.

What I was hoping for wasn't much: to make a new dance poem. It would be the first time mana chain knights and mana heart knights are gathered together. For them, existing dance and war poems will be merged into one, and I was about to weave a poem dedicated to the knights. It would be a song sung by Ring Knights and Heart Knights both.

Indeed, it would be a pretty cool poem.

Just by imagining it, my heart started to jump quicker in my breast.

I hoped and hoped that Arwen would return from her mission as soon as possible; we would only be complete when she comes. I laughed as I awaited her coming, joyfully imagining it when-

"The name of the Knights Templar should be the Golden Lion's Five Fangs."

I decided not to pour cold water over Eli's attempt at trying to use his naming skills.

"I think it would be good if the order of the fangs is decided based on skill, with everyone competing and proving their place."

Thinking that his name sounded satisfactory to me, Eli became even more delusional. He said in a grim tone that the day would come when he would be better than Vincent and Carls.

“When Arwen comes back, we’ll all discuss and decide on a name,” I stated.

“Don’t you like the Five Fangs of the Golden Lion? So how about this — the Five Roaring Lions.”

“If we’re named that, we disband today.”

Eli kept talking, consistently ignoring my words. It was a fact that I had encountered before: Eli was the worst at naming things. I once again prayed for Arwen to return to the fort as soon as possible.

“How about the White Lion Knights? There are Golden Lions, Gifted Lions, Iron Lions, but no White Lions. The name means lions roaring on a rugged snowfield, but there are other meanings…”

Eli, the ever-talkative one, always grew quieter in Arwen’s presence. So, I eagerly waited for her to return from her mission, meanwhile directing Vincent to take over the contracting and organization of the newly arrived mercenaries.

“I’ll have to take a look at many documents again.”

Vincent soon became buried in a pile of papers. It disgusted him, but he didn’t tell me he was the wrong person for the job. Thanks to his vigilant labors, which took many days, five hundred mercenaries were finally reborn as soldiers of the kingdom.

From among them, I selected those with great potential, separated them, and made them knight candidates. I let Eli train them. Hansen, who had gained his family’s tradition thanks to me, lived and trained with them.

Three more weeks passed. The rampage of the monsters that had swept over the kingdom had been settled, and urgent information requests no longer flew to the fort. The stronghold regained its tranquility, and only the screams and spirits of Hansen and five hundred mercenaries echoed through it.

And then, the next thousand mercenaries who had passed through the border reached the fort. This time, Eli went out to welcome them in my stead.

“Welcome to the Land of Knights, the Kingdom of Leonberg.”

I quickly sorted out the mercenaries while Eli mimicked my greeting without

changing a single word. Again, nearly half of the mercenaries were sent away from the fort.

They were soon followed by Adelia and the rangers. A few days later, wagons full of weapons and ragged mercenary banners arrived. Adelia, in bloody clothes, returned with the hard-faced rangers.

“I come home from my mission!”

Adelia’s report was as it had been before, and I patted her on her shoulder, pleased that she had been working hard. And soon after Adelia’s return, a visitor came to the fort.

“Okay. What are you doing in the kingdom?” I greeted the guest, growling, my face set in a sneer. She was an unwelcome guest to me.

CHAPTER 260
BLOOM IN DIFFICULTY (6)

Although I had not given any special instructions, the rangers climbed the fort's wall and leveled their crossbows. The Winter Knights drew their swords and surrounded the elves.

Eli raised his energy, looking as if he would have a seizure on the spot. Adelia's eyes were already red and yellow beams. Carls stood in front of me, his face firm and his shield raised. Vincent had already climbed the wall, staring at those beneath it with an icy gaze.

The mercenaries who lived in the tent camp outside the fort came to the walls as if they had all been beset by an instantaneous tension. They were swaying, gripping their spears and swords with stubborn faces without knowing what they were doing.

Beyond them, there stood a woman, the top half of her face obscured by a hood — Sigrun, the hateful faerie. Just looking at her sparked an intense fire within my insides.

"I asked what you are doing in the kingdom," I demanded, grinding my teeth, and Sigrun licked her lips beneath the hood.

"Our breakup wasn't very beautiful. It's regrettable that you got too violent while we were engaged."

Sparks of energy splattered from me, sizzling onto the snow.

Whenever I closed my eyes, I could hear the fierce, beastly screams of the tongueless half-elves. The image of their torn cloaks and the red drops of their blood hovering before me was imprinted upon my memory as if it had happened yesterday.

How dare she speak like that in front of me?

My energy flowed out without my knowledge, and my hand gripped the sword hilt tighter.

Then, I suddenly saw Sigrun's face.

"Oh. It looks like you haven't gotten rid of your anger yet."

Sigrun frowned as if this made her sad. The moment I saw her red lips, which seemed to be aflame, I became frigid.

Instead of releasing my anger, I swallowed it, kept it inside.

Sigrun was deliberately stimulating me, intentionally encouraging my anger and hatred.

She wanted to ravenously eat away at the emotions I unleashed.

I suppressed my anger and marshaled my hatred so that my feelings for the half-elves do not become a matter for her entertainment; so that the fort's troops do not get caught up in the rising tide of hatred.

"Woo," I took several long breaths, deeply subduing emotions that had reached a boiling point. Ignoring the heinous Elder High Elf, I looked over her shoulder. There were one hundred elves with blade-like spirits, and in the middle of them, from atop a long pole, a flag flew in the wind. Upon it was a symbol of a pure white branch and three leaves upon an olive-green field. It was an object Sigrun had never brought with her, even though she had invaded Leonberg's lands many times.

No, to be precise, it wasn't that she didn't bring it, but that she couldn't. After being defeated in the Great War the faeries were forbidden from using any kind of heraldry. Now, however, Sigrun has proudly stepped upon the kingdom's land with a banner symbolizing her identity. And this she did with a hundred sentinels from her clan.

The portent of this action was no light matter.

It meant that the oath enshrined in the previous declaration had weakened to the point where it could no longer enforce itself. The day when the evil elves escape from their shady forest, unleashing themselves upon the world, has come.

This also meant that humans could no longer claim to be the masters of this whole earth. I had believed this could happen at any time; it was a situation I expected. Nevertheless, my breaths were still short — it was too early. I had thought it would

take at least ten more years.

I have been unable to organize all the gifted people raised in the kingdom, and the knights weren't ready yet. But it was here — the faeries have been released into the world. A fantastical vision appeared before me.

I saw a ruined city and a burning fortress. A mother who had lost her child wailed its name, and around her, the corpses of citizens were piled up like a mountain.

I felt dizzy, but gritted my teeth and endured the wooziness. I strengthened my eyes and once more glared at Sigrun's banner.

The three leaves symbolized her status as Elder High Elf.

Not yet. There was still some time left. The ancient decree's effects had not completely worn off. Had they been obsolete, then I would have seen the Elf King's flag fluttering here, not the Elder High Elf's.

Sigrun would not have visited me if that was the case; she would merely have run wild and started her carnage, just as she had done in the past. However, she was before me now, and I wagered that her visit was not a private one.

She was here in a public capacity, on business so important that it was necessary for her to bring a hundred clan sentinels and even raise a flag.

I stared at Sigrun, and the elf licked her lips when she looked at my face.

It was as if she was sorry that I had mastered my anger and hatred before she could predate on it. After a while, her quivering lips spoke in a sarcastically twisted tone.

"But why don't I see the half-bloods? I'm sure I left a few of the things alive. Oh, maybe you killed them all by mistake?"

My heart spread blood through my body at a rapid pace, and the anger I had managed to subdue once more rose like an inferno and coursed through my body.

I was out of breath and my heart jumped like crazy. My mana ran toward my hand, and just before the coursing energy reached my sword-

'Chuck!'

I took my hand off the hilt. Sigrun's intentions were clear; she was hoping that I would lose my temper and run wild. Maybe she wanted to satisfy her ravening appetite, dining on my overflowing anger, or maybe she was looking for a justification to pay me back for the shame of making her retreat from me in the past.

Either way, I didn't intend to match her beat.

"I will ask again: what are you doing in the kingdom's territory?"

The twisted smile under the hood became even more distorted.

"That day…"

'Shh,' Sigrun drew back the hood covering her face. And upon her features, there was an inconsistency with her angelic appearance. A red scar ran from Sigrun's forehead, across her brow, and onto her cheek. She raised her hand and started stroking the wound.

"It's a scar your Highness left me," she whispered as she covered her eye with her palm. Her voice was ominous, like a hissing snake, and the muscles in my entire body tightened as I met her shining gaze. At that very moment, 'Chuck!'

The elven sentinels started moving their feet.

'Chuck! Chuck! Chuck!'

Unlike the normal rhythm from a mana heart, their dance was arrhythmical, with cross beats intertwining. For a moment, my stomach shook.

The ominous energy contained in their dance pressed in upon me. Although the sentinels weren't high elves, they were elites picked from the ranks of common elves. They were far more threatening than the High Elf I had faced before.

The entire area was soon drowned in the noise they made, and nothing else was heard. But that was all it was — a melody created by a hundred elven sentinels that could press into me before I channeled mana from my heart.

A thumping noise broke through the elves' tune and reached my ears. The noise was far too heavy to be made by the comparatively light elves.

‘Bang!’ Winter Knights beat upon their breastplates.

‘Bang!’ The palace knights struck the ground with their shields.

‘Thud!’ Rangers on the walls stamped their feet vigorously.

Unlike the elven melodies, these noises were harmonious and regular. I listened to the wordless rhythm of Leonberg’s military. It was Eli, Adelia, Vincent, Carls, and all the soldiers. My heart began beating faster. Before I was conscious of it, an enormous energy arose and began to resonate within the area.

“Your Highness,” I heard a call from the wall. I looked up and saw that Vincent was staring down at me. He looked strong, unshakable like a great wall. Vincent told me to hold fast like a fortress. I began remembering the time when the orcish Overlord had surrendered. I remembered what the knights said back then. I clearly recalled their words after the King of the Orcs surrendered. The voices of Winter Castle’s men rang out in my ears as if they were real.

‘Even if the lance is shattered and the body torn, the unbending soul must remain the same.’

‘We are not a burden for our lord to carry, but the swords and spears that he will wield!’

‘What we want is victory at the end of struggle, not the peace achieved by compromising with a coward!’

‘I will open my eyes and fight the enemy instead of becoming blind for the sake of peace.’

‘If someone has to die, it will be me.’

After the auditory recall, I heard Vincent’s voice.

“Don’t hesitate.”

The moment I heard him say this, I realized: what did I look like to Vincent and the others? It must have seemed that I had sagged before a mighty enemy. They might think that, facing an invincible foe, I was looking for any excuse not to fight.

My face burned; it seemed that everyone was having a lot of strange thoughts in the vicinity of the elves, and I was forced to do something about it. I had to form a compromise in my mind, as the lives of everyone rested on my shoulders. Since some already believed the enemy was mighty, I stepped back.

Even when I had fought the Warlord, or drew my sword against the Empire, I had never been a cowardly man. I corrected my posture by straightening my shoulders and waist. I raised my chin, and as always, looked down on the elves before me.

“If you have come as a messenger, deliver it and go away, Sigrun.”

Hearing my words, Sigrun still covered one eye with her hand, while the other was wide open. However, she did so for only a while, removing her hand and narrowing her eyes. The elf’s face was her true face that I had seen that day; it was expressionless as if her soul had escaped her.

A thousand years’ worth of sharpened hatred flowed from Sigrun’s body. The twisted desire that had festered and grown within her for a millennium battered into me without ceasing.

I didn’t back down; I strengthened my knees before they buckled and I straightened my posture.

“I’ve been waiting so long for today to come,” Sigrun said quietly. “It’s not as fun as I thought it would be.”

The air trembled unsteadily with the murderous and hostile energy flowing through it. But I was still not shaken. Behind me, the rangers and the knights raised their weapons.

Now, I came to understand Agnes’s heart. I knew how she had endured without getting her legs broken while facing an enemy that pressed her down with its mere existence. I knew how she had drawn her sword without hesitation. Although the warriors standing behind me have not reached the level of the Iron Blood Knights who had supported Agnes back then, there was no shortage of talent for me now. The fighting spirit of the rangers and knights served as my support, ensuring my knees would not buckle and break.

Their great will had already made it clear that humans would not give in. We would always fight and claim victory as we have done in the past.

‘Huk!’

My energy, which had been overwhelmed by Sigrun’s hateful torrent, reared its head. The dim glow upon my body quickly spread in all directions. I was set and determined and glared at Sigrun.

“Do you think I’ll know the message if you don’t tell it to me?”

“I have the power to make you a handful of ashes at any time,” Sigrun whispered darkly.

Faced with her threat, one she might give substance at any moment, I said, “Try.”

I grabbed the handle of my true body.

“Because you will struggle for every action you take.”

If necessary, I would die to end Sigrun, sacrificing what life remained to me.

Saying so, I drew my body. Right then- ‘Dudududududu!’

I heard the faint sound of horses galloping. I shifted my gaze and saw a cloud of dust appear from the opposite side of the plain.

From the east, west, north, and south; from everywhere, knights fully armored in iron rode in under the great cloud of dust — bearing aloft the golden lion banner of Leonberg.

‘Buu wooo wooo!’

CHAPTER 261
BLOOM IN DIFFICULTY (7)

Among the troops riding in from all directions, those to the east caught my eye first. While the dust clouds still stretched over the other group, the riders from the east had already reached the fort.

The leading knight among them came out alone from their ranks, riding to face me.

'Vwaat!'

Without reigning in her horse, she jumped from it, vaulting herself out of the stirrups.

'Bwak! Kwask Dsheuk!'

After the peculiar noise of a heavily-armored knight landing on the ground came the sound of her sabatons scratching over the soil as she continued to walk. The knight lifted her helm's visor, and fine dust scattered from it. Her face was also dust-covered after the ride through the wasteland, and her black eyes shone like starlight.

It was Arwen. She made eye contact with me before nodding slightly.

There were no words of greeting upon our reunion, and no explanation of the circumstances that led her to arrive earlier than expected. Even after seeing me and the faeries and the confrontation in front of the fort, Arwen did not say a word.

She merely stood by my side and silently raised her energy. It was weird, but I knew we were simply adding another sword to the battle. The addition of Arwen's power didn't mean that beating the monstrous Sigrun would be easy.

Still, the moment I felt her energy, my heart relaxed. While my heart had been beating nervously, Arwen's energy was sharp and noticeably stable.

I felt like I was complete. Gripping my true body tighter with one hand, I looked at Sigrun and couldn't help but frown. The elf looked at me, with her hair radiating out

from her head as if a flower had blossomed around her eyes.

“Your Highness is one of the few I had seen who has loyal persons that can be counted on.”

Sigrun tilted her head, fixing her gaze on my knights. She looked at Eli, Adelia, Carls, the countless rangers and knights behind me, and Vincent.

“So you say that’s Count Balahard. He looks like an old knight from that time, and so do they.”

Sigrun’s gaze finally settled on Arwen.

“She, too.”

The elf licked her red lips, as if looking at a juicy pomegranate, then turned her head back to me. The ominous glow that had skulked within the depths of her eyes now began overflowing from them.

“A soul that shines so brightly.”

As if she had never been a soulless creature, Sigrun’s face became filled with vitality.

“You… No way… Maybe she is your Highness’s shining star?”

Sigrun’s eyes scrunched up as if she was having a pleasant conversation. The hairs on my neck stood upright, and my hot heart quickly cooled down.

“Sigrun!”

When I came to my senses, I was already moving, shouting fiercely. I gripped my sword with strength, gathering a flash of light to its edge, and stepped out.

My eyes tracked Arwen. A greenish shadow popped up near her, and a silver arc of light slashed out. Without hesitation, I thrust my sword toward Arwen and the green shadow. Before my sword’s arc was complete, I put my other hand upon its hilt. As the heavy metal texture touched my fingertips, I knew there was no time for thoughts.

I instinctively thrust out to protect Arwen. With her arms lifted for a strike, I twisted

my body and moved my sword in beneath them.

'Klang! Klang!'

Two clashes of steel rang out, loud enough that they seemed to tear relentlessly at my ears. I had been in a hurry and couldn't draw out enough energy, and had barely beaten back the monstrous Elder High Elf's attack. I raised my head and followed Sigrun's movement, getting grit into my eyes. There was a lot of dust everywhere, and in the middle of the dust cloud, all I could see was Arwen leaning in my arms.

I looked at her with concern. Her right-hand gauntlet was shifted out of place, and I saw that it was bloody. The iron armor covering her right arm was also crushed and dented, no longer serving its protective purpose.

Arwen frowned and spat out a blob of blood.

"Are-"

"Your Highness." Although she was pale, she spoke to me, as always, with a strong voice. "The enemy has not withdrawn yet."

"What?"

"Let me go."

Arwen pushed me away before I could even respond. Although she staggered once, she took up her usual upright stance. She pulled off her torn gloves and ripped off her vambraces, couters, and pauldrons, which were no longer in a state to protect her. The armor, torn and dented, fell to the ground, exposing Arwen's bare, bleeding skin.

Her wounds were unsightly, making me frown. But Arwen didn't care about them; she merely raised her sword as if she didn't feel any pain. I noticed that there was a small liquid stain on the tip of her sword. It was hard to notice, yet it was obviously blood, though only a few drops. Before I realized whose blood it was, Arwen charged forward.

'Klang Klang!'

The dust had not yet cleared, and beyond it, a terrible battle was already in full

swing. In the hazy air, I saw the light from pale and golden Aura Blades. It was the energy of Eli and Adelia, and Arwen's light and energy were soon added to the fray.

'Sasa… Sasasak.'

From above me, I heard the sound of the rangers' crossbow bolts tearing through the air. I stepped up to join the battle, or at least, I tried to — I couldn't move a single step.

Rather than drawing out my mana, all I could do was give strength to my bent knees and tolerate the pressure. At that moment, I realized that Sigrun had been playing me from the beginning.

Her targeting of Arwen, forcing me to stop the attack, was merely a tactic she used to easily neutralize me. What Sigrun really wanted was for me to remain as an onlooker.

Me standing here stupidly, watching my dear knights die, and seeing everything I held precious collapse was the final act of this play which the elf has prepared over the years.

It was the twisted way in which the Elder High Elf enjoyed her dinner, and it was the tragic end to countless young heroes. I clenched my teeth and drew out my energy.

However, my current ability was not enough to dispel Sigrun's energy that had infiltrated me. I breathed wildly, stimulating my frozen mana heart.

The dust clouds were blown away by the wind, and I could finally see the battlefield. Eli wielded his sword, constantly repeating poems. Adelia struck her blade down, a brilliant light shining all over her body. Arwen joined in late and was dishing out attacks like a meteor shower.

They were severe foes to face, with Aura Blades that could tear opponents apart in an instant. However, Sigrun wasn't quite on their level. She had been born with the characteristics of a Mistletoe Clan hero.

Even the Dragon Slayer, which had already gained karma by slaying a true dragon four hundred years ago, had its energies easily scattered by such a monster, and I could not guarantee our victory.

Bernardo Eli hit the ground. Adelia was battered back, vomiting blood.

Arwen quickly became bloodier— but no one withdrew.

Eli, after rolling over the ground, jumped up and ran at Sigrun. Adelia, who had been bounced some distance away, charged back. Bloody Arwen spearheaded the attack against Sigrun. They must have already felt it: how strong Sigrun is, and the fact that the swords they had honed all their lives were vain implements against her transcendental powers. Every one of them must be feeling this fact painfully.

Nevertheless, their energy had not been dull from the beginning of the battle, and their actions of risking their lives against a great foe were majestic rather than desperate.

The knights were aided by Jordan and other veteran rangers.

'Sassasak!'

Amidst the chaos of the champions and Sigrun facing off, with none of the combatants standing still for a second, the rangers fired their crossbows, aiming only at Sigrun with surprising sophistication. Although none of the bolts touched Sigrun's body, they were enough to bother her. The fact that Sigrun had lived for a long while after crossing the threshold of transcendence didn't mean that bolts could not pierce her flesh.

The northern knights clashed against the sentinels without stopping. Two or three of the royal family's erstwhile secret knights, Gwain included, gathered and slowly slew the sentinels one by one.

'Dukudukuduku!'

And then, the kingdom's knights and troops who were riding toward the fort came onto the battlefield.

"Take them out! Join up with the defenders!"

Without any hesitation, they struck the sentinels through the clouds of dust their galloping horses were throwing up.

'Bwang!'

There came a heavy noise and the bodies of sentinels were thrown in all directions.

The knights broke through the swirling dust.

“Don’t let a single elf live!”

At their forefront were old knights, their blades shining with sword auras. And so, Leonberg’s knights completely annihilated the sentinels, and the play prepared by the evil elves came to an end.

“I’ll never get tired of seeing it anytime soon.” An eerie voice broke into my ears. “The sight of humans overcoming difficulties by throwing away their lives is a most magnificent and beautiful sight.”

The wailing of dying horses that had rung out all over the battlefield died down. The sounds of weapons clashing, which had continued without halt, stopped.

On that battlefield, where all fighting had stopped, everyone looked in one direction at once. Their gazes were fixed upon Sigrun.

“But, unfortunately, my preference is not to see how humans face adversity, but rather seeing how their vain hopes can be shattered.”

Sigrun threw off the mask of the good elf, and her face now looked as dry as sand grains in a desert.

“Like now.”

‘Hwaak!’

A tremendous energy was aroused in her body.

“Rotate your rings to resist!”

“Unleash your energy and protect yourselves!”

Northern knights and commanders, veterans of war, as well as Count Brandenburg’s knights cried out their orders urgently. However, since Sigrun was incomparable to the Warlord, the resonance of a thousand rings was insignificant and fleeting in the face of her natural presence.

The existence of the monstrous elf, who had lived for a thousand years and always

desired to reach the highest place, was enough to tear the souls from those who had not achieved great feats and karma.

The soldiers fell to the ground, clutching their necks.

Blood spilled from the eyes, noses, ears, and mouths of the rangers who were holding on, gritting their teeth. Knights groaned, their bloodshot eyes trembling. Probably, if they endured longer, the soldiers would die where they were and the strong rangers would have their souls damaged, becoming gibbering idiots.

Knights would also be ruined, with their mana hearts and rings destroyed.

And the same would happen across the whole kingdom. I studied Sigrun's power, and finally, I was able to gauge her strength.

"It doesn't seem to be worth half her lifespan," I muttered bluntly.

The screening was complicated, so I quickly closed my eyes. Countless thoughts came and went through my head. So many emotions bloomed within my heart and were lost again. When I opened my eyes, all that remained within me was a little regret and sorrow.

"Vincent," I called to him on the wall.

While desperately trying to resist Sigrun's energy, Vincent and others turned to me, hearing my voice.

"Arwen, Adelia."

Carls, Jordan; I called the names of those dear to me in turn. Each one of their face was captured within my gaze, and the knights widened their eyes when they met mine.

Looking at them where they stood, I said, "Thanks, I had a pleasant dream."

I could only laugh, and it was probably one of the greatest smiles I had ever smiled. It must have been a truly bright smile. I turned around.

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Hearing Arwen and Adelia's screams behind me-

'Fuwook'

I shoved my sword into my chest; my body, my other half — precisely towards my heart.

CHAPTER 262
IF THE NIGHT IS LONG, THE DREAMS ARE DEEP (1)

Adelia Bavaria had always thought that his Highness was somehow strange. She wasn't thinking about his sudden change of personality, but rather that he was so consistently paradoxical. She knew his inside self was different from his outward character. At one point, he could be like an old man who was well-versed in worldly affairs, and at another, he was just like a child learning the ways of the world. He was wiser than anyone, yet more ignorant than all. At the same time, he was surprisingly greedy and absurdly ambitious. In addition to this, he was both generous and outrageous.

He was an old man with many years' worth of deep wrinkles while being an innocent child with an unblemished face. It was as if he had brought together all the contradictory aspects a human could have into a single being.

Was that why the evaluations of those who met the Crown Prince were strikingly mixed?

The knights all said that he was courageous, driven, and devoted. The nobles spoke of him as a fierce, cunning, heartless prince.

The maids and peasants also said that he was a generous man of superior empathy. And when it came to Adelia Bavaria-

"He's a lovely, tender person."

The prince was like a timid child to her. Adelia, who was meeker than anyone else, knew she would eventually face ridicule by saying this about the greatest knight in the kingdom.

However, she truly thought so — the first time she had thought like this had been when the former Count Balahard died. At that time, he had looked like a pale-faced child who had made a big mistake. His shoulders were slumped, and it was clear that

he blamed none but himself. The image of the young prince, who couldn't even shed tears, unable to express the sorrow in his heart, remained so clear in Adelia's memory even after several years.

He had then torn into the Warlord, pouring out the sorrow he had endured all that time, all the sadness that had festered within him. It was then that Adelia could first realize his true nature.

Since then, he had grown bolder. He had become braver and got stronger — at least, this was how he appeared in the eyes of others. But Adelia, who had always served the prince up close, thought differently.

She knew he had receded even further, becoming more timid and even weaker. He was afraid that he would lose those dear to him, so he was all alone. Some nights he had nightmares, groaning and shedding tears in his sleep. At that time, Adelia stayed by his side all night, clutching his hand and wiping the tears off his cheeks.

Whenever he got up again, he never knew that he had been weeping all night, and spent his days as always.

His uncle, the Northmen, the half-elves — as the wars continued, the names he repeated in his sleep continued to increase in number. Yet still, he remained completely unaware of his dreams. It was a secret that only Adelia Bavaria knew. At least, that was the case until the news of the queen's death reached the Gifted Lion Citadel.

The king, who had come to the prince late at night, wiped the sweat from his body as she shook with a cold fever, curled up tight. And for the first time, the king knew what nightmares his eldest son, who he had thought was wholly sturdy, had suffered in his slumber.

Since that day, the king's attitude toward his son softened.

Adelia didn't think this was strange in the slightest. No one would be able to deal blindly with a poor man suffering from nightmares if they knew the weight of his sorrow over the deaths of others. However, even if the king had learned of the burdens and sadness carried by his son, there was something he did not know.

It was the most regrettable contradiction of the numerous dualities and paradoxes existing within the prince. While he was terribly afraid of something ever going

wrong to those he held dear, he was uninterested in his own life and death.

It seemed as if the prince didn't think it mattered if he died; he seemed to think that it was enough to expend all his power, even if he fell in a fight.

Observing such a figure, Adelia realized that whenever the moment came to choose between his life and another's, the prince would choose to die without any hesitation.

After realizing this, Adelia Bavaria promptly changed. She wanted to be the prince's strong pillar. When the moment came for him to choose, she wanted to relieve him of such a choice and take his place. That's why she personally conducted the operation to neutralize the bad mercenaries.

However, despite her efforts and determination, the moment she had hoped would never transpire came crawling into reality. She was barely able to remain standing in front of an overwhelming presence she had never thought could exist.

"Adelia."

She heard the prince's voice and turned her head, struggling against a pressure that seemed to tear at her soul. He was there, with a calm face that didn't suit the urgent situation. Adelia's heart sank, and an ominous scene rose into her mind. She wouldn't allow it, it couldn't be — yet, her hopes were crumbling.

'Thanks, I had a pleasant dream.'

It was as if Adelia herself was in a dream, for there was no sense of reality. Her head was dizzy, and her legs felt lame. She felt nauseous, her face pale, yet she forced her stiffened body to move. And in exchange for moving, for bearing against the unstoppable presence, terrible pain came to her.

Red blood flowed from Adelia's petite nose, over her teeth; it dripped from her ears and eyes. She couldn't bear it and ended up falling to the ground.

"Ooh ugh."

She stretched out her hands, her fingers slamming onto the ground, gripping the earth with all her might, so hard that her fingernails were forced back, tearing from her flesh.

She crawled on like that, screaming, “Your Highness!”

However, before she could scream again, and before she was able to crawl to him-

‘Fuwook!’

An eerie squelching noise came to her ears.

‘Tlup, tlup’

As she watched the prince’s back, she saw blood dripping down, wetting his feet and forming into a small puddle.

“Ahhh…”

His body trembled like an aspen in the breeze. Torn by what she was seeing, Adelia widened her eyes, “Aahhhhhh!” and screamed.

And, at that very moment-

“Hear me, you of a faithless tribe, for you have broken the Great War’s covenant.”

Even if it was in a coughing voice, the prince’s tone was surprisingly clear as it flowed into Adelia’s ears.

“I command you as an observer of the declaration,” the prince said, pausing, “return to your promised exile.”

‘Hwaak!’

A brilliant light burst out and swallowed up the world. Adelia passed out, and some time passed. When Adelia reawakened, she had no idea how long the hell had continued. The first thing she saw was the remains of the elven soldiers, with only dented armor and gobbets of flesh marking their passing. But-

“Alas…”

The accursed monster was still there. Even though her finely-braided hair had become loose and tangled, she still stood there. The elf raised her hand and touched one half of her face. There was a slight tremble in her shoulders. Then, her entire

body began to shake.

“Kehihi kehihi,” the elf gave a high-pitched laugh. “Ah… I never imagined your Highness would be throwing out an oath that no one remembers. I have nothing to say except that this is really amazing.”

After laughing like a lunatic for some time, Sigrun lowered her hand. Her eye socket was empty, her one eye gone as if it had never existed.

“But what else can you do? You dredged up that old pledge, hoping at most to cut me down, but all you collected were a few sentinels and an eyeball.”

The elf again trembled all over as her laughter tittered madly.

“I do not care.” It was then that the prince spoke. “If you will break your oath, I will enforce it.”

The elf laughed at his words, but quickly stopped and twisted her mouth into a sneer.

“I hope you don’t believe that the sword will help. That piece of iron was merely present, and it has no ability to enforce anything.”

“If this sword had been a mere witness, then that would be true,” the prince said, his voice bloody and simmering, though he stabilized his tone surprisingly quickly. In contrast, the elf’s one remaining eye stretched only wider.

“I am both observer and signee of the covenant.”

“What the hell does-”

Before the elf’s words were complete, the prince spoke again.

“I was Agnes Bavaria’s mentor and friend. The one who inherited her legacy.”

At the same time, a faint glow began to flow from his body.

“In the name of Iron Blood, our indomitable souls were shared!”

“What are you saying!”

“Comrades who shared karma by winning numerous wars!”

The prince then pulled out the sword that had penetrated his chest.

“One of the six Templars of the Great War!”

At that moment, his sword began to cry.

‘Aa, aa, aa!’

At the same time, a great aura, a type of energy that could not be touched, stretched out in all directions.

“I am here to enact your sentence as an enforcer of the covenant.”

Standing in the center of that glimmering radiance, the prince readied himself to carry out the sentence.

“Those who sin by violating the oath cannot be saved. They are going to be extinguished.”

It would be complete annihilation, leaving no soul — that was definitely the most terrible death penalty. The death row prisoner resisted violently.

“That old pledge! It no longer exists.”

‘Go-oh-oh-oh-oh!’

The elf raised her energy.

“I am the Mistletoe Clan Executioner, head of a thousand sentinels. I am the king’s sword.”

Sigrun’s tremendous energy overturned heaven and earth, and the whole world quaked.

“On behalf of my clan, I hereby declare that we sever the shackles that have bound us for a thousand years!” the elf shouted, her words sounding like maniacal laughter.

Facing that terrifying energy and such outright ridicule, the prince-

“Your words have determined the fate of your clan.”

The prince merely gave a low sigh. And at that moment, the auspicious light surrounding him completely consumed his being.

‘Cheolkup! Cheolkup!’ A heavy metal sound came from within the sphere of brilliant light.

The elf’s eye shone with a beam of radiance, and she gripped her sword and struck the golden sphere of light.

‘Kraak Kurr!’

The sky roared, and the earth shook. Moment by moment, a catastrophe powerful enough to destroy the fort came into being. A crack appeared in the golden sphere, and the elf persistently aimed her attacks at the gap.

‘Bzak! Bzak!’

Then, finally, the sphere cracked with a buzzing sound, and the light of victory flared up in the elf’s eye. However, hers was a hasty judgment.

‘Wkzaaa!’

An auspicious flash burst out from within the split sphere. The elf twisted her body, end the flash of light disappeared into the distant plains.

“This-” The elf looked at where it had touched her flesh, then she lifted her trembling eyes, seeing that the sphere had been split in half. Its two halves dissipated into shining, scattering dust. And in that glowing cloud, he appeared, with the head of a dragon on his right shoulder and a lion’s head on the left, wearing bright golden armor that appeared to have been forged from light. In his hand, he gripped a sword as long as himself.

The golden knight looked at the elf, and he shouted.

‘‘The stairs to the sky collapsed!’’

The aftermath of the flash of light and his exclamation was by no means trivial.

“All that remains is the cunning tribe’s screams as they plummet!’’

It resulted in a powerful being losing her eternal potential.

CHAPTER 263
IF THE NIGHT IS LONG, THE DREAMS ARE DEEP (2)

Sigrun's body rattled as she raised her hand. A dark blue stain had been spreading across its back like spilled honey. And soon, the stains spread over her entire hand. They didn't just bloom there; the same thing could be seen happening all over Sigrun's exposed flesh. The Mistletoe Clan elf lifted her sword. Even in the midst of battle, not a speck of dirt had stuck to the blade, and Sigrun could clearly see her appearance mirrored in the gleaming metal.

Her entire skin had turned blue, and her eye black. It could no longer be said that she was a graceful faerie whose beauty people envied and desired. She was now merely something ugly and disgusting. Yet, the truly terrible thing wasn't her nasty looks.

Sigrun grabbed at the air. There was nothing, yet Sigrun's eye had seen her thousand-year-old legacy collapse like a sandcastle; she clearly saw the fragments of her karma and spirit scatter away like grains of sand.

She collapsed as she felt a radical sense of loss and deprivation for the first time in her life, with these emotions filling her empty body. Shuddering under that terrible feeling, she soon found out the truth of the matter. She knew that from this day on, she would no longer be able to dance with her sword. It was more than a gut feeling; she was certain that she was of no use to her clan anymore.

Sigrun started laughing. It came out as a groan at first, then it rattled her entire body, becoming a mad, rasping, breathless laughter. Sigrun laughed like that for a while, then stopped, and spoke.

"That day, and today too. The covenant always surprises me."

Her words were neither false admiration nor ridicule — she was truly surprised. Sigrun didn't know how the young prince of Leonberg, who had even forgotten his family's traditions and was too weak to access Dragon Slayer's true power, could have unleashed such an ancient power. She couldn't even imagine how it was all

possible.

Sigrun narrowed her darkened brows and then looked at the human in front of her.

“Thanks to that charge, I’ve lost the greatest of my strength. I am damaged, and can no longer perform my sword dance. My body’s abilities have been considerably lowered, at least by thirty percent. Maybe, as time goes on, the things I lose will become more and more. There will be much suffering.”

Her voice was dry, like grains of sand shifting on a dune.

“But the same counts for Your Highness. To disallow me my powers like this, your Highness must have paid a price. And the only currency Your Highness has is your life. So, in exchange for your existence, you have been handed power. Your gains… how long do you think they will last? Now, even in this moment, the time left to your Highness must be continually decreasing.”

Crown Prince Adrian Leonberger did not answer. He just silently stared at Sigrun through the slits in his helm.

Sigrun wished that she was able to get rid of his helmet right away. The act of drawing out power at the expense of one’s life entailed the painful shattering of one’s soul, and not being able to see the prince’s face contorted by pain was annoyingly unfortunate. Instead, Sigrun suppressed her desire to rip the helmet off and continued speaking.

“Maybe you don’t have that long left, since you have already once drawn upon the sword’s power by using your life as collateral. However, this fight will end; you will probably not make it,” she said, staring straight at the prince. “You can’t avoid your death.”

He still stood silent. Perhaps it was because he was enduring the overwhelming pain of his dispersing soul, or maybe it was because he didn’t want to shorten his life by opening his mouth. Either way, Sigrun didn’t care; she didn’t want to. There was only one thing that was important to her.

“I’m glad that you did this on my behalf.”

It was the fact that the man in front of her was betting his life and soul in order to destroy her own.

“I can’t help but repay you in kind.”

There wasn’t any doubt that he would barely be able to drag his body away from here while his soul was being consumed. However, Sigrun had no intention of letting him die such a vain and merciful death.

“Before the sliver of life remaining to your Highness is completely extinguished-”

A purple energy began flowing over the elf’s blade.

“It’s my turn to rip out your eyes with my own hands.”

And then, the battle began.

* * *

At once, the ground split as the sky was torn open. It was a fight occurring in a realm that humans could not even imagine.

Airwaves and tremors battered into the fort, making the stronghold shake as if it would collapse at any moment. There was not much that ordinary humans could do in the face of such a terrible contest. Some lay flat, covering their heads, while others trembled, denying the reality of what they saw.

However, there were still some soldiers who did not belong to either group.

“Stand!”

“Wake up!”

These men shouted harshly, forcibly rousing the soldiers who all felt completely terrified.

“You weak southern cubs!”

“You want to die in this fortress!”

They were the Winter Castle rangers, and they ran through the entire fort with their hardened bodies, pulling soldiers out of the stronghold and to safety.

“The fort will soon collapse!”

Knights also constantly shouted with mana as they set about evacuating the soldiers hunching on the ground or hiding in the fort.

“Take the injured first!” At the center of it all was the Winter Commander, Duke Vincent Balahard. “This is our final chance to get the remaining supplies and warriors out!”

Vincent stood on the buckling wall, which seemed ready to collapse at any moment as he orchestrated the soldiers’ evacuation.

“Commander! You have to get away!”

“There are a lot of troops that haven’t evacuated yet! These are the troops that his Highness has taken this risk to protect! We can’t let them die in vain!”

“But-”

“Don’t let me say it twice! Go and save those soldiers first!”

Vincent was pushing his knights like never before.

“Hurry!”

“Yes commander!”

After watching them disappear into the fortress, Vincent turned his head and looked over the plains.

‘Bang! Bang!’

Countless flashes of gold and purple light bloomed and then faded. And when the light faded, shattered rays of it unerringly slammed into the fort.

‘Krurrrgh!’

Vincent gazed at the trembling walls and at the battle on the plain, and his eyes were gloomier than ever before.

“It’s like that day, damn it.”

He saw it all before him: the day when Winter Castle fell, the day when his father finally failed to return from battle. He recalled the dark green waves of abominations, the burning castle, and the desperately fleeing soldiers, his vision overlapping with the crumbling fort. All that was different was that it was not waves of greenskins that struck at the walls, but the golden and violet flashes.

Vincent was just as helpless as he had been on that day, and all he could do was watch on. The image of the prince thrusting his sword into his heart entered his mind, and he shuddered. He could still hear the sound of the blade piercing flesh. Vincent figured it must be a ritual to draw out the power of the royal sword, the Dragon Slayer. It was clear that legends of the Leonberger royal family weren’t mere empty tales. Such golden armor Vincent had never seen in his life; it was indeed straight from a legend.

However, Vincent could not feel the thrill of witnessing a legend come alive before his very eyes, nor did he feel any joy at the fact that the person who reclaimed the legend was his dear cousin, the prince.

Vincent was anxious. Strangely, he could not calm his heart down. He shook his head, trying to shake off such sinister forebodings. He constantly spoke to himself.

“It’s going to be different than back then. He’s a knight several times greater than my father. So, Ian will surely come back.”

Vincent repeated the same words countless times, yet he remained nervous. How much time had passed, he wondered?

“Commander! The troop evacuation is over!”

The knights who had gone off to save the troops returned.

“Are you sure none remains?!”

“We’ve got them all… No! Even if there are some left, we can’t get to them anymore! If we tarry, all our rescue teams will die!”

At that very moment, one side of the keep collapsed with a great rumble.

“Commander!” the knight screamed as he grabbed Vincent, who knew he could no longer be stubborn. Vincent was confident that he was among those that the Crown Prince was trying to protect, and Prince Adrian would not wish for him to die in the fortress and share his fate.

“Damn!” Vincent swore as he ran down the steps of the curtain wall.

‘Rrummble!’

And in the instant after Vincent passed through the gate, the wall sank to the earth with a roar, scattering a lot of dust and mortar into the air. In the meantime, Vincent kept bellowing out orders.

“Withdraw your troops as far back as you can! If you can, get to where you can’t see the flashes!”

Vincent coughed a few times between giving commands to his officers.

“Commander! Where are you going!”

“Please fall back!” Vincent shouted in reply, and set off at a run, going around the collapsed wall and toward the plain. He almost stumbled over scattered stones several times, finally coming to a stop close to the area where the battle was in full swing. Vincent had come to where the champions and a few others were already gathered.

“Good job.”

Count York Willowden, champion of the kingdom and grandmaster of the Templar Order, praised Vincent briskly when he saw him. Instead of responding, Vincent looked over the plain, with flashes of light striking across it.

“It looks like a scene from a myth,” York said, looking to Vincent for confirmation, but the duke once more remained silent.

“The royal sword is such a great thing,” Count Stuttgart observed.

“No matter how wonderful it is, it needs a man who can endure to wield it, and that is another power of his Highness.”

York Willowden and the Palace Knight Commander were constantly admiring the Crown Prince's battle. However, the prince's knights, Vincent included, soon spoke up and disagreed with their words. Whether or not the old knights thought that too big a fuss was being made, they shut their mouths and grew silent, keeping their thoughts to themselves. It wasn't strange that Prince Adrian's knights were frowning in anxious silence, for their master was famous for entering the most terrifying battles.

However, no matter how worried they were, they could only look on with grim intensity. They did not once look away from the contest, and their pale lips were tightly shut, their fists clenched to the point of bleeding, with their entire faces looking terrible.

Among them, Adelia Bavaria was, by far, the worst, for she had tried to plunge headlong onto the battlefield several times.

Had Arwen Kirgayen not stepped up and rebuked her for being disturbed in the mind, Adelia would have been scorched into a handful of ashes under the intense flashes. However, now, Adelia was held in Arwen's arms, staring at the plains upon which the Crown Prince did battle. Her eyes were empty as if her soul had escaped her body, and rays of light and tears alternately flowed from them.

Adelia was regretful and terrified, so much so that she somehow maintained a grip on reality. Though there were certain degrees of difference, the others were all similar to her.

Bernardo Eli, who frequently fiddled with his sword, looked very unstable. If he was left in his present condition, there existed valid concerns that his mana heart could be damaged. The same counted for Arwen Kirgayen.

Outwardly, she seemed to maintain her composure the best among the prince's knights, but in reality, this was not the case at all. One could see it by looking at her sword.

Arwen's sword aura flared up from time to time, and she was gripping the hilt tightly. She repeatedly forced the aura to fade back down, but was constantly staring at the far side of the plain, trying to see whether she could feel the prince's presence.

Carls Ulrich, famous for being serious, possessed a sharp enough discipline for him

to resist the urge to charge onto the grim battlefield right away.

York Willowden, who had lost his composure and avoided meeting the gazes of the young knights and champions, turned around, opened his mouth, and decided he would give them at least a few words of comfort.

‘Qaw ahhh!’

A tremendous energy burst somewhere behind his back. York stiffened where he stood. He was now very afraid of turning his body, believing that he would face something terrible were he to look back. Still, he turned around, and he saw it: something giant upon the plain that was slowly raising its head. It was something so supreme that York could never have imagined something like it existing in the world; it was something wild that he feared to even look at.

‘Krumble!’

Eventually, the thing which had raised its head also raised its body, and this was when York Willowden screamed.

“A dragon!”

Shortly after shouting so loudly, he promptly realized the truth. He had soon come to understand that the thing he had thought to be a dragon was actually an illusion of swordsmanship. York was utterly enchanted as he witnessed such an expression of energy, something he had never heard of. And just then-

‘Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!’

At this, the dragon form suddenly spread its wings and soared into the sky, soared toward the eye of an ominous storm of purple flashes.

CHAPTER 264
IF THE NIGHT IS LONG, THE DREAMS ARE DEEP (3)

The dragon of light hurtled into the storm, and from there came a great explosion of sound. A terrible shockwave hit the entire world.

And after all of that-

'Pot!'

As if it had all been an illusion, storm and dragon both disappeared in an instant. There remained no auspicious light, no ominous purple brilliance, and no movement. All that remained was dirt and dust rising to the ends of the sky. People swallowed nervously, not even daring to predict the outcome of this mythical battle.

Just by recalling the splendid dragon's majesty, they vaguely guessed that the Crown Prince would have won.

However, instead of talking about the outcome of the battle, they quietly waited for the dust to clear. In stark contrast to this, the prince's knights did not stand still like the others. They threw themselves into the dustcloud, gripped by a desire to reach the prince. Once inside, the dust was so thick that they struggled to see even an inch ahead of them. Nevertheless, they ran on without any hesitation.

With their sight obscured, all they could see was the earth beneath their feet ripped and plowed by the battle. The champions and the duke fell onto the uneven ground over and over again, yet they did not allow this to stop them for a moment. They merely charged on, as if they knew where the prince was to be found in the cloud of dust.

The special oath they had made a while ago, that tightly bound link, aided them a lot, showed them a lot. They sensed who the victor of the terrible battle was, and where they had to go. But still, what was the state of the winner?

They kept running. Those bound by their vows followed the guidance of their souls, and those not bound followed the others without a halt. And so, they headed to where the prince was and finally arrived.

As if by magic, the wind blew in at that moment, driving away the dust. And upon the clearing landscape, they saw the victor and the defeated. There was the elf, with her shoulders and upper body torn as if ravaged by some maw.

“When I first met you, I felt that my destiny was intertwined with yours. Since that day, I have thought about it every moment – how will our destinies play out?” Sigrun said, coughing blood. “And now, my curiosity is sated.”

She looked at her upper body with her one remaining eye, then looked up again at the prince.

“You are the arbiter of my fate.”

The elf smiled, her pleasant expression not fitting the situation.

“But for my destiny to be but one of the countless fates that your Highness determines…”

Sigrun’s smile was insidious and sinister. “That’s not what I want.”

The elf then laughed, revealing her bloody teeth.“I am greater than that.”

A purple glow rose from the elf’s body. “As your Highness is my end, I hope to be the same to you.”

The knights immediately intuited the situation, knowing that she was about to do something dangerous. They knew that Sigrun’s actions would be of no benefit to them or the prince, and having realized this, they were already moving.

Arwen Kirgayen wrapped her arms around the prince’s body. In front of them stood Carls Ulrich and Vincent Balahard, serving as the shield and walls that they were. Adelia Bavaria and Bernardo Eli shot out like javelins towards the elf.

At that very moment- ‘Quap!’

A sword protruded from the elf’s chest, before the radiance shaking as if it would

explode right away could be released, before any of the knights reached the elf. Sigrun looked at her chest and the tip of the blade protruding from it. She shifted her gaze behind her back, and there stood a woman wearing a green cloak, most adept of the half-elves.

“So- You, a humble hybrid, dares-”

‘Kwaduk!’

Pale and golden Aura Blades slashed into Sigrun’s body.

‘Tuk Degur!’

The elf’s head promptly rolled over the ground. Filled with the twisted desires and murderous intentions that had ruled her life until the last minute, Sigrun could not even close her one eye after her head was severed. And that was how the evil faerie, who had destroyed countless heroes over the span of a millennium, met her end.

“Highness!” Adelia Bavaria threw her bloody sword aside and turned to her master. Bernardo Eli did not even think of sheathing his sword when he also turned to the prince.

“Your Highness…” said Arwen Kirgayen to the man who breathed heavily on her arms. Vincent Balahard knelt before the prince. He still thought of the day when the castle his family had protected for ages burned, the day when he did not see his father’s face for a final time, and he looked as if he would collapse at any moment. Still, Vincent knew what transpired today was worth it. The golden, ethereal armor that had shone so brightly was gone, and the prince’s bare skin was revealed, intact. No more blood flowed from the hole in his chest.

“I lost my temper. Even if she couldn’t employ her sword dance, this was all too much. And for all of you to risk your lives – it’s really unfair.”

The prince complained softly, and whenever he parted his lips, blood flowed from between them.

“Your Highness! Your Highness! Don’t say anything!”

“There’s no monster worse than she. Even though not as monstrous as Sigrun, there are a few more Elder High Elves. If they come out now, the kingdom won’t be able to

withstand their onslaught."

"It doesn't matter what happens to the kingdom right now… you're on the brink of death!" Vincent screamed, his face contorted.

"It's a good thing… Thanks to you guys, I was able to reserve my last strength."

"Please! Please! Shut your mouth!"

But the prince did not stop talking.

"Adelia. Could you raise me up?"

Adelia shook her head violently.

"Adelia."

She shook her head even harder.

"Adel-"

"My prince, no!" she screamed. "I won't listen! I won't follow!"

The prince sighed.

"Your Highness is trying to use your last remaining strength! If your Highness exerts yourself, you'll surely…"

The prince smiled a bitter smile as he faced the desperate resistance of the woman whose soul was enslaved to his. Then, he laughed. No matter how he looked to others, his happy face was directed at Adelia and the fact that she had grown from meek to great. Adelia herself was deep in contemplation as if she had realized that she could stand on her own from now on.

"Don't do it! Do nothing!" Vincent urged desperately.

"You talk too brashly, Vincent. I'm still the Crown Prince."

"What if you're a prince! I'm a duke! You may become a prince who never rises to the throne! I can say no more than this! So please, shut your mouth and stay still!

Please…"

The prince shifted his gaze, looking for someone to help him out. Carls Ulrich shook his head with a stern face. The Crown Prince then turned to Bernardo Eli.

"I'm always being treated like this. I always do everything that others don't want to do. Do you think I'll do it again? Absolutely not."

Eli's eyes were full of tears as he spoke of his dissatisfaction.

"Arwen."

And at last, the prince's gaze settled on Arwen Kirgayen.

"You know… If you feel like the others, you don't have to answer."

Arwen didn't answer.

"You're the one."

The prince glanced at those who had refused his request with a spiteful face.

"Please. Help me to finish this."

Arwen bit her lip until it bled, the tight muscles around her eyes twitching. Then, after a while, she opened her eyes and grabbed the prince's drooping body, raising it.

"Oh, no!" Adelia screamed, also grabbing onto the prince's body.

"Sir Arwen!"

Eli and Carls had ashen pale faces, and they tried to stop Arwen.

"What are you doing now?!"

Vincent Balahard's anger was fiery, and Adelia continued to cling to the prince's body.

'Chuck!'

Carls drew his sword, placing it against Arwen's neck.

"Stop it."

However, Arwen was not concerned with the cool texture of the iron sword pressing against her neck. She just continued to raise the prince up. Knowing that Carls would not stab the blade into her flesh, she managed to help the Crown Prince to stand.

"Thanks."

Finally, the prince stood on his own two feet and expressed his gratitude with a benevolent smile. Then he pierced the royal sword into the ground, the weapon not having been released from his grasp until the very end. The prince's body, which seemed as if it would collapse at any moment, still stood tall.

''The stairs to the sky collapsed''

A soft song flowed from his mouth.

''All that remains is the cunning tribe's screams as they plummet''

At first, his voice was so weak as to be near inaudible, but at some point, it began resonating across the plain.

''In a flurry the tale does spread, and all in the world know of their fall''

And a light burst from the prince, with him looking back at his knights in that bright glow.

"Don't think about saving me with elixir, or by reliance on fortune. Nectar will restore my body, but it won't be able to restore my broken soul. So use it where it is more needed."

An extraordinarily brilliant flash engulfed the prince. And when the light faded, he closed his eyes, leaning against his sword.

"Well, your Highness…" Adelia Bavaria staggered as she rounded on the prince. "Your Highness, your eyes…"

The moment she touched him, the Crown Prince fell. Adelia looked at him with

unfocused eyes, looking at the slowly falling prince and the knights rushing to him.

“Ahhh…”

She clenched her cheeks with both hands, and started groaning, as if in pain.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!” Adelia screamed.

It was at that moment that the chain connected to her soul broke.

**

‘Ching!’

Lionel Leonberger looked at his hand with a frown. Blood poured from where he had cut his finger on broken glass.

“Why, Your Majesty! Are you okay!?” The marshal, who has dining with the king, got up from his seat with a concerned face.

“I don’t want you to fuss about me getting a cut on my finger,” Lionel Leonberger said as he looked at the broken glass, already having wrapped the tip of his finger with a handkerchief handed him by the attendant.

“Is the glass old? There seemed nothing wrong with it.”

“I sold all the good-quality tableware to cover our finances. I can’t say that those that remain are of good quality,” the marshal told the king with an embarrassed face.

“It’s time for everyone to tighten their belts, so there is no need to feel guilt.”

“Your Majesty understands, so I feel more comfortable,” the marshal said, and then suddenly remembered something else. “By the way, they say the exterminations are almost at an end. Maybe the Crown Prince will return soon.”

Hearing Bielefeld’s words, Lionel Leonberger looked out of his window. It seemed that his eldest son, who had run wild without worrying about his father’s command that he should avoid battle by staying in the rear and appeasing public sentiment, would soon arrive in the city.

“When he comes back, he will be punished. I will be very strict so that he can learn how to sit still.”

The marshal laughed, unable to hide his smile after hearing the king say he would punish the prince.

“News, your Majesty!” It was then that the Palace Knight Commander opened the door, running into the room.

“His Highness the prince…”

King Lionel’s face, also smiling, hardened.

“Sire…” Bielefeld looked at the king and the messenger alternately with a pale face.

Lionel Leonberger jumped up from his seat and headed straight for the city gate. Once there, he sighted the knights who had halted before the wall. The young champions, the pride of the kingdom, did not even step up to greet the king. Suddenly, Lionel’s eyes were drawn to their shoulders. The positions where the proud knights wore their pauldrons and epaulets were marred by scratches and dents. As soon as King Lionel saw this, he felt a veil pierce into his mind. When he came to his senses, he was standing in front of a small cart.

“I beg you, brother… wake up.”

His second son was there, weeping, unaware of his father’s arrival.

“Why do you sleep like this… Please! Please… open your eyes! Brother!”

Maximilian, beset by a fierce sorrow, saw his father and spoke.

“Oh father… Your Majesty. My brother is acting strange. He is sleeping without answering my words. Your Majesty will punish my lazy brother who sleeps without knowing I am here… No. Please do not punish him. Just make him wake up!”

The younger prince, who always acted more mature than his age, now cried like a child. King Lionel, looking at the cart with a hard face, forced his hands to stroke his stiff neck.

There was his son—his eldest son who left the royal palace to subdue the turmoil in

the kingdom, the boy he had promised to severely punish upon his return. He had been loaded into the cart, with his hands resting upon his chest, laying quietly, his eyes closed.

CHAPTER 265
IF THE NIGHT IS LONG, THE DREAMS ARE DEEP (4)

Disbelief arose in the father's eyes when he saw the hole in his son's chest, beneath neatly folded hands.

"How could you…"

King Lionel was unable to finish his words.

"Why are you…?"

He started speaking and then stopped, trying to ask the same question over and over again.

"Why are you like this?"

The king was silent for a moment before speaking again.

"After all this time, why did you let this happen? Didn't you say that you wouldn't fight? Didn't we agree that you would take care of our people, safe in the rear? If only you did not stay longer, if only you returned after finishing your work!"

His eldest son gave no answer.

"But why are you… Why are you! You came back like this!"

No matter how many times the king asked, no matter how much he pleaded, there was no response.

"Duke of the North! Answer me! What the hell happened there! Why is my son like this?!"

The young duke, standing by the wagon with his head bowed, plunged to his knees.

“Your Majesty… Please…”

Vincent’s sorrow-filled voice made the king whisper to himself for a while. Then he looked at those around him.

The knights standing near the wagon knelt, almost collapsing to their knees.

“I… I just want to know. Why did my son let this happen? But none of you can answer me…”

The knights lowered their heads.

“Aah…” the father sighed, no longer able to look at the knights. He shifted his gaze to his son, taking in the dented and cracked iron armor laying to one side of the wagon, and the red bloodstains that could be seen where the armor had been removed. King Lionel’s anger had nowhere to go, and he again glanced at the knights. It was clear that they had rushed here, unable to tend to the prince’s wounds.

“Huh.”

He reached out his hand to his eldest son, ran his fingertips over his limp and unmoving body. Prince Adrian’s body was quite light without the armor, and his father lifted him, hugged him. He gripped him tightly, for it felt as if the son in his arms would fly off right away. His eyes took in the prince’s scarred body which seemed so very broken.

For a long time, the king stood tall, hugging his firstborn’s body.

He still couldn’t believe it, expecting the prince to open his eyes at any moment.

Where the heart should’ve been beating vigorously, there was an open wound, yet his son’s body was still warm. It would have been normal for the body to have stiffened during the journey from the central region, yet the flesh remained as soft as that of a living person.

However, no matter how long the king waited, his son did not open his eyes. After standing there for a while, desperately, futilely grasping for a sliver of hope, the king stepped back. Yet, he took only one step as he came to a stop.

‘Tuk!’

He looked at the tips of his son's hands as if possessed by the lack of power flowing through them. Those torn, cracked, and twisted fingers filled his vision; the crushed and hardened palms that looked as if they had been burned. Here was the figure of his eldest son, who had clearly fought by gripping his sword with all his strength, and now, those well-trained hands would never again reach for a weapon, for anything. It was then that the father's will broke.

"Huh…"

The tears that he had desperately bitten back began to crawl across his cheeks.

"Ooh aah ah aah ah!"

Between his wracking sobs, King Lionel gave voice to a sorrowed scream.

* * *

'Chuck!'

The palace knights surrounded the king, standing with their backs to him as they grabbed their red cloaks and spread them out.

'Hwararak!'

A red curtain appeared around King Lionel.

However, although the veil obscured a father's tears at losing his child, it could not dampen his grieving cries. From within the red barrier came the sound of the king's sobbing. Beyond it, the knights who had lost their master remained kneeling, mourning silently, their heads bowed.

The Marquis of Bielefeld looked at the sky.

It's too cruel, he thought. The buds that had sprouted upon the queen's grave have not yet flowered, and the new flesh had scarcely grown over the wounds upon the king's flesh. The old noble steadied his burning eyes and clenched his teeth. He struggled to keep his face composed and again looked before him.

The second prince, who had been terrified by his brother's condition from the start, finally fainted.

“Take your lord to the palace!”

The palace knights picked Maximilian up and rushed him away. Even amid the activity, those knights surrounding the king stood stock still. The sound of weeping was now heard only occasionally. Then, it ceased completely, and the king emerged from the wall of cloaks that shielded him. He staggered and almost fell, but still gripped tightly onto his son, not entrusting him to anyone until the end. No one dared to venture forward and offer help, not even able to look at the king.

The Palace Knight Commander suddenly looked at Marshal Bielefeld, glancing at him with bloodshot eyes, silently urging the marquis to order things in his absence. It was a hard request, but after a while, Bielefeld quietly nodded his head.

“Palace knights, we return.”

They passed through the gates, following the king. The prince’s knights did not rise, even after the palace knights had disappeared into the city. Marquis Bielefeld hesitated several times as he stood before them, finally speaking.

“Duke of the North… It seems that your wounds are severe, so go and take care of them. Don’t let your body be damaged by clinging to futile deeds and thoughts.”

Even after hearing the old marshal’s words, the young duke could not muster the will to get up. The same was true of the other knights. The marquis gave a long sigh and raised his hand.

“Guards.”

Then he summoned the garrison’s soldiers, who stepped up and forced Duke Vincent and the knights to rise.

“Take the northern soldiers and knights to the palace.”

The prince’s knights, reputed to be among the strongest warriors within the kingdom, were near-dragged toward the gate by the soldiers.

“What the hell is going to happen to the kingdom…”

The marquis gave a curt sigh and followed them.

**

Siorin Kirgayen had returned with great urgency from business that had taken him away from the capital, and he was worried about his eldest daughter, so much so that he could not bear it. So, before dutifully going to the king, he sought out his daughter first. Even though he was neglecting his duties as Prime Minister, he wasn't even able to see Arwen's face. He stood on the doorstep of her residence, yet could move no further, having become frozen on the spot.

"Huh…"

It was as if the voice coming from inside the room was gagged by a cloth; the voice of his daughter, sounding suppressed and cramped. It was so faint that he had to strain his ears to hear it. It was natural, Siorin knew, for Arwen's world was collapsing around her. Despite opposition from her father, she had always been a strong child, persisting in her own way as a woman in a man's world—but now, she wept.

Hearing her pain, as if her heart was being torn apart by a thousand forks, Siorin had to lift his hand, which had touched the doorknob several times. Siorin couldn't even step away, knowing that it would break his heart. Unable to do this, unable to do that, his heart sickened. Suddenly, he heard footsteps coming from behind him. Amazed, Siorin turned his head to confront the uninvited guest. On the other side of the hallway stood Vincent Balahard, looking at him with a dry face.

Siorin touched his lips, making it clear that the man was not welcome, that he should go away. However, the young duke didn't care about this fervent request.

'Dush! Dush!'

The unusually heavy footsteps rang out in the corridor, forcing Siorin to turn away from the door. He glared at Vincent with resentful eyes, yet the duke walked on, coming to a standstill before him.

"Didn't I say the timing is bad now? If you have anything to say-"

"To be honest, my anger toward the Lady Arwen hasn't subsided at all," Vincent suddenly interrupted Siorin. His voice had an uncomfortable tone as if rusty iron nails rattled in his throat.

"What are you doing h-"

“If it wasn’t for her, maybe there might have been another way.”

“Duke of the North! Shut your mouth right now!” Came Siorin’s angry shout as he challenged Vincent’s reproof.

“But far greater than my anger is my shame.” Even in the face of the minister’s rage, Vincent Balahard continued to speak steadily.

“While everyone, including me, looked cowardly on or turned away, only Lady Arwen faced reality. She alone bore that heavy burden on her shoulders.”

Siorin Kirgayen, who had been about to yell the unwanted guest away, shut his mouth and remained silent.

“It was an ugly situation for us all, champions and nobles alike.”

Only then did the pain and regret arise in the young duke’s eyes.

“But as things stand now, I cannot say sorry, nor can I say thank you, so it seems that my hands are tied,” Vincent said in a bitter tone as if bile was rising up in his throat.

“I will go from here to his Majesty, and if dishonor is decreed in the process, I will carry it all. I will do my best not to let his Majesty’s anger fall upon her. So, I shall say that Arwen was just trying to recover his body. I will commit myself, and hope that she will remain as honorable a knight as before,” the duke said as he looked down upon Siorin Kirgayen.

“I will now leave you with your pain. Excuse me.”

Before Siorin could say anything, Vincent Balahard turned around and left. Siorin looked at the duke’s back, and when he was left alone once more, he looked at the door again. He hesitated for a long time but eventually said he would come back again. The door did not open again, even after everyone had disappeared.

**

After leaving Arwen Kirgayen’s residence, Vincent Balahard immediately sought an audience with the king.

“Sire.”

In a dark room, the king sat next to the prince where he lay in bed. Looking at the monarch's slumped back, Vincent bit hard onto his lower lip.

"The elves came that day."

Then, after a long time, he began to speak to the king's back, telling him of that terrible day. Without a single omission and adding no lie, Vincent told of how the Crown Prince fought, and how he ended up like this.

The king listened to him without speaking.

"And when the final light faded, his Highness fell…"

**

"Your Highness! Your Highness!"

Carls Ulrich's face was pale as he crouched next to the prince, touching two fingers upon his wrist. Then, he hardened like a stone.

"Move!"

Vincent pushed Carls aside and also felt for a pulse with his fingers. There was nothing; he couldn't feel the heartbeat that should be there for any living creature.

"It can't be like this…"

Once more, he confirmed the prince's lack of a pulse. Even after checking a few times, the results were the same. Right then, a pure white hand approached, almost like a phantom's, and reached into the prince's chest pocket. It took Vincent a moment to realize that it was the half-elf who had pierced her sword through the evil elf's chest.

"What are you doing…?"

While the knights were wracked with indecision by her sudden actions, the half-elf suddenly pulled a small vial from the prince's pocket. She popped the lid and poured the elixir into her mouth.

The people who had stared at her blankly now reached out to her, spurred into

anger, but she suddenly lowered her head. Then, she kissed the prince on his mouth.

Those who saw her squeeze her lips against his grunted, realizing that she was pushing the elixir into his throat.

'Pot!'

A faint light flared up and surrounded the prince. At first, there came hope into the knights' eyes, despite the fact that the prince had said it would be useless to try and save him with Nectar, that it had to be used for something more important. They just wanted a miracle to happen, but there was no miracle.

Even after the half-elf parted her lips from the prince's, his breath did not return, even after the gently flowing light had completely disappeared. Dashing the hopes that the same elixir that had brought the king back from the brink of death would save the prince, only one of the numerous wounds on his body, one of the holes on his chest, sealed itself.

"Ahhhhhh!"

The knights had vaguely watched the scene when they snapped awake to the voice of the half-elf crying out like a wounded beast.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

Then, looking at them, the elf beckoned, then gestured.

"Let's go back quickly?"

Fortunately, her sign language wasn't very different from that of the rangers, and Vincent Balahard could understand the meaning. But that was all—he understood what she meant, but he did not understand the intention behind it. No matter how many times he asked, the half-elf simply repeated the same gesture.

**

"As time passed, his Highness's wound, which had healed, began opening up again. Maybe she simply wanted his Highness to return to his hale self, even if only a little."

The long and sorrowful story was finally over. The king, who had been silent for a

long time, suddenly spoke.

“The warmth that remains in my son’s body is just the aftereffects of the elixir.”

Having the final hope he had been grasping for till the end shattered, the king’s voice was that of a father whose heart had been trampled upon; it sounded horrifyingly empty.

“Sire!”

Vincent Balahard sank to his knees.

“I pledged to be responsible for his Highness’s conduct and to ensure that he would return safely no matter what, but I did not keep this oath. Please punish this unfaithful and incompetent servant! Also, please order me to war! I will take blood revenge on the peoples who have taken your Majesty’s flesh and blood away from us all! Even if every soldier of Balahard dies in the battle, I’ll spill the blood of these elves!”

The king did not look behind him, despite the grief and hatred in Vincent’s voice.

“Go back. Go and let your body heal.” The king spoke in a spiritless voice.

“Sire!”

“Those of Balahard have already spilled too much of their own blood. I won’t allow you to go, so know that you must retire.”

“Sire!”

“I know that you and my son were like brothers. Your heartache is great, for he was special to you. We can discuss revenge on the day when you regain your coolness.”

Before Vincent could say anything, the king raised his hand.

“I won’t tell you again. Please leave me. It may be a faux warmth left by the elixir, but I don’t want to let go of his hand yet.”

Vincent Balahard ended up dropping his head and withdrawing from the king, who had spoken in an embarrassed tone, faced with the desperate injustice of his son’s

demise.

**

Carls Ulrich even refused treatment, instead choosing to stand on guard. His complexion was pale and his tunic bloody. His comrades, after seeing him stand guard in his ragged clothes, advised him to take a break and first heal himself, but he stubbornly remained standing. He even got angry, asking how he could face the shame of being unable to protect, and whether he truly looked as if he wanted to take a rest.

The Palace Knight Commander himself ordered Carls to stand down, but he did not listen even to him.

Carls said, “If I am forced away, I will take my own life.”

It was a threat that would not have worked at any other time. However, even the commander could not blame Carls for his persistence today. Count Stuttgart had patted him on the shoulder and said that if doing his duty made him comfortable; it was not a bad thing. Carls Ulrich was grateful for the consideration, yet he completely disagreed with the statement. His mind could not be comfortable—no, it shouldn’t be. Even at this moment, regret and guilt were weighing heavily upon him.

He always wanted to be the Crown Prince’s best knight. He had always hoped that when the prince picked his dearest knight, it would be himself. When Carls thought about it now, it was a hope filled with selfishness. As he realized the extent to which his heart had been impure toward the prince, he shuddered.

When Arwen Kirgayen had taken up the burden that everyone turned away from, Carls himself had turned from the prince. Even when the half-elf ignored the will of the Crown Prince and took that final leap without hesitation, Carls had merely watched on, passive. When Adelia Bavaria had tried to commit herself several times to the battle in aid of the Crown Prince, Carls had been in a hurry to stop her and stand back. When Bernardo Eli had torn off the epaulets marking him as a champion and rushed at the elf, Carls did nothing.

Even when Vincent Balahard had pleaded to be punished for his sins in front of the king, crying out for revenge against all the evil beings, all Carls could do was stand and listen outside the door.

He was no more than a bystander at every moment; he was just a neighbor to those who did great things. This fact was unbearable. Carls hated himself, he who had only possessed the modest desire to be the prince's dear friend. And so, he could only bear the sorrow by punishing his body like this. In this way, he could punish himself for the unforgivable disgustingness of being overly self-consoling.

"Do not blame yourself."

While Carls was trembling with this sense of self-doubt, a soft voice suddenly poked into his ears.

"Who are you?!" Carls Ulrich drew his sword and swiveled around. There stood a woman wrapped in a white cloak, and she was looking at him.

She said, "Not all souls shine brightly as they go. Still, sometimes there are people who see my light if they stand consistently still."

As Carls looked at the woman's strangely hazy face, his focus gradually began to blur. Then, his knees became weak.

'Dump!' The palace knight, who had been standing upright through the night, collapsed to the floor.

"How come there are only fools and lamenters around him?"

The woman looked down at the prone Carls and then moved through the darkness like a ghost, heading into the king's residence.

'Kreek!'

She opened the door, and then waited for a moment, standing in its frame. She hoped that the king would soon fall asleep completely, for he desperately endured her slumbering spell for fear that when he awoke, he would find his eldest son's body cold to the touch. The prince's father resisted for some time, until his hand finally fell away from his son's, his chin coming to rest on his chest.

The woman slipped into the room the moment when the king slipped into sleep. She went to stand by the bed, staring down at Adrian Leonberger.

"In this existence, you have again chosen death, not life," she said after a while, her

tone sad. Her expression suddenly became hazier.

“Poor Gruhorn.”

There was deep compassion in her voice.

“The Great Dawn Knight.”

She spoke with the greatest of respect.

“A poor and tender boy.”

Her words were also desperately dear.

“I don’t want your life to end as sadly as before.”

“I hope you will finally enjoy the grand glory you have achieved in your past life… Because you deserve it.”

The woman reached out her hand.

“That is why I have to prevent your long-promised rest.”

At the moment, the air distorted, and the woman pulled a bloody mass to her fingertips.

“The source of my life.”

The lump clutched in her hand wriggled vigorously.

“All of my soul.”

She brought it to his chest without hesitation.

“I dedicate it to you.”

The lump was sucked into the hole above the prince’s heart—and the light began to flow.

“Maybe you will blame yourself again. Maybe you’ll be angry with me for doing

something so useless.''

The woman gave a gentle laugh.

“It’s because you are like that. But nevertheless, I hope… I hope that you won’t be grateful nor sorry for me.”

The woman’s body gradually started to fade.

“I am the white night. In the deepest night, I am the light that shall sit crouched in the darkness, existing upon a crying soul, alone.”

“That’s the fate given to me.”

“And if I can rest within you for a while until the dawn brightly shines…”

A faint smile bloomed on the woman’s lips, and it was the smile of the White Night Mage Ophelia.

“That’s enough for me.”

And at that moment- ‘Hwaak!’

A brilliant light then burst out.

CHAPTER 266
IF THE NIGHT IS LONG, THE DREAMS ARE DEEP (5)

Pain that seemed to burn into my heart now came to me. My eyes turned in their sockets and the world became white.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

“Noo… eh, eeh, eh!”

The screams of my dear ones rang throughout my ears.

“I’m…!”

“…Please…!…!”

Even that faded and disappeared. My consciousness became distant. There was a sharp ringing in my ears which felt as if it was tearing my eardrums apart. The sky collapsed, and the earth rose. In the midst of countless gyrations of reality, I began to fall down. Down, down, ever deeper.

‘Plop!’

I heard illusory sounds, and a chill came over me. Even the pain that burned my heart seemed to freeze in that terrible chill. My thoughts, my consciousness, were distant. It felt as if I had already been through the same situation before. The sensation when I had first peeked into the memories of my previous life had been exactly the same as now. Yet, at the same time, it did not feel the same. The memories of my past life had come to me unexpectedly; today’s actions had all been my own doing. Also, on that day I had merely glimpsed death beyond the boundary. Now, I’ve completely crossed that barrier.

I was dead.

I looked down. The dark abyss I had seen before was waiting for me with its maw stretched wide open.

I looked up again. It seemed as if I was peeking at the world from beneath a lake frozen in midwinter. I stared blankly at the solid surface as I sank endlessly deeper.

Then, at one point, terrible pain came.

Would it ever feel like this if my flesh had been cut from me?

Did it feel as if all the bones in my body were being torn apart?

Wouldn't it be like this if all my fingers and toes were scorched into cinders?

It felt as if my consciousness was flying away from me and the terrible pain. Maybe it would be better on the other side. Perhaps it would be less painful. But the pain constantly awakened me; there was no escape.

The only thing I could do was to sink endlessly, struggling.

'Fuush!'

My body seemed to be burning, yet my soul was freezing. My fragmented and scattered soul shards collided with each other, stabbed into each other and shattered even more. And while my soul was broken like that, it also hardened. I didn't think I would ever be able to put my shattered soul back together again.

It felt as if it would endlessly be powdered down like that, leaving nothing behind as I scattered into the void.

I was so scared, and I knew: the time given to me was ending. The end imposed upon me was approaching, and there was nothing I could do.

The results would not change, even if I were to struggle. And even if I turned away, the moment of my extinction would arrive. And so I just waited, struggling with the pain, trapped in the coldness. Trembling in fear.

My soul was shredded and frozen repeatedly. I waited for it to disappear utterly.

It was a terrible experience that wasn't easy to bear, even for me, who had existed for

countless years. It was too harsh for the handful of fragments of my shattered soul to bear. But nevertheless-

'Kahaha!'

I laughed. The faces of countless people came to my mind—Arwen, Adelia, Vincent, Carls, Bernardo.

Those who I held dear, my knights. My uncle, Jordan, the Winter Castle knights and rangers. Gunn, Gionne, and the other half-elves. Ophelia, Agnes; the people I loved, my people. The king, Maximilian, Bielefeld, Siorin, and countless other.

Just remembering their faces made me laugh. It had been very fun. All the hate, all the love; the fighting and understanding. True, these were just single moments in my long life. But at the same time, they were the most intense moments of my ancient existence. If someone would ask me then, I would answer them with confidence: It hadn't been a long time, but it had been fun. I would say that I had lived well.

I was beaten and diminished, yet I stood tall.

{Why the hell is your face so sad?}

At that time, a blunt voice came from somewhere. It was Agnes.

{You have lived happily, so what's with you having such a face?}

'I'm worried.'

{Why the hell is that?}

'I can't forget the pale faces of those I love as they looked at me in the final moment.'

{Why worry about them when you're the one dying?}

Wouldn't the thoughtful Arwen be blaming herself for aiding my death?

Perhaps Adelia, ever timid, was crying because she was scared and alone without me.

I wondered how hard it was for the honest Vincent to lose me after his father's

demise.

I knew that Carls, with his strong sense of responsibility, would be feeling pessimistic.

I wondered if Eli, that stupid guy, would abandon his dreams after seeing what happened to me.

And in truth, I simply couldn't stand it because I was worried that those I left behind would be having a hard time because of me.

{You're a stupid guy.}

'I also know this.'

{A person who lives like a hermit, worrying about others all the time but pretending to be strong on your own.}

In the midst of such unpleasant feelings, my sadness eagerly clung to me.

{You are an idiot.}

I started laughing as I heard Agnes's fiery rant coursing through the vicinity.

{Fucking hell! Don't laugh if your face looks like that. Damned… at least look happy for me.}

'Thanks, Agnes.'

Agnes didn't answer me, and she didn't talk to me anymore. However, I could feel that she was still watching me, probably trying to complete this final journey with me. I had been afraid that I would disappear alone, but Agnes's words made it possible to forget my pain and fear of annihilation, if only slightly. Thanks to this, I was able to wait more comfortably for the end.

I thought so, but I proved to be wrong in the end.

I existed in a space where I could not know where the top and where the bottom was. And then a being of deepest darkness emerged from the abyss with its mouth wide open. It was the first time I've seen it in person, yet I knew what it was: a soul

predator.

It was the true face of the power I had used when I was a sword, when I had devoured souls offered to me as sacrifice and leaving no trace of them. The greedy beast shuddered as it tasted the air, as I watched my shattered soul flow ever down. The moment I saw it, the fear of extinction that had left me for a moment reared its head once more. Terrible pain again began to dominate me.

I didn't struggle. Instead, I grabbed the part of my soul not yet fragmented and stared at the predator. If I was going to be eaten anyway, I would do so with open eyes, facing the monster—so that my end would not be miserable and undignified.

The thing hovered around me as if waiting for my soul to be wholly cut to pieces.

'Shuur!'

Wherever the being passed, only deep darkness remained. So, when it had rotated around me a few laps, my surroundings consisted of an utterly black void.

'Smalsmal'

Little by little, the darkness got closer.

{Poor Gruhorn.}

It ravenously ate away at the fragments of my soul that flowed out of my body.

{My beloved mentor and friend. Please, your-}

Even swallowing Agnes's voice.

In that manner, the soul predator finally got in front of me. Everything before my eyes turned black, and only darkness was visible, a darkness so deep that nothing else could be seen. Even the faces of my dear ones were chewed up in the end.

I knew then that I was finally alone. I intuited that the moment of my extinction was imminent. And that moment was was more terrible than I thought. I was lonely, I was afraid. In the dark, I could hear the beast chewing on something. I didn't know if it was a hallucination brought on by my fear, or if it was a real sound.

The only thing that was certain was that it would never be satisfied with just the crumbs. The last thing that would come to the table of the unsated beast would be the remaining, unscattered portion of my soul. I suddenly realized the identity of the greedy beast, knowing that I had known him in the past.

It was probably the most powerful enemy that I had defeated. In this terrible world, it was a very strong and tough evil that would wait for my ultimate scattering for many hours. I saw him, and he was looking at me.

With a gaze full of anticipation and evil, he was waiting for me to break apart into even finer pieces.

And finally, the moment he was waiting for came.

Two pieces of soul promptly fell from my body.

I stared blankly at my sundered soul, all with a terrible sense of loss and helplessness. There was a large fragment that shone brilliantly even in the darkness, and a small, shabby piece that shone faintly in comparison.

The moment I saw it, I knew: the big piece was from my previous life, and the small fragment was the time I had lived as Adrian Leonberger.

The darkness opened its maw.

'Alas… '

Looking at it, I struggled like crazy, desperately reached out, and grabbed them—the large fragment, and the smaller one, my life as Adrian. I hugged the pieces of my soul, holding them tightly in my arms.

I curled up, waiting for the pain of annihilation that would soon come. The beast opened its mouth, wider and wider. I closed my eyes, holding the pieces of my soul that remained even tighter.

'Farewell.'

Within myself, I said goodbye to those I loved. However, the pain of extinction, which seemed so imminent, did not come.

‘Ah, ah, ah!’

Instead, a painful scream came. I opened my eyes again and saw a golden soul shining brightly in front of me.

I blankly looked at the shapeless mass of light.

{It was unsightly, so I could see it no more} Agnes said bluntly to me.

‘Why?’

{I’m just paying my debt.}

‘What debt?’

{As you did for me, I will do so for you.}

It felt as if her unexpected answer hit into me, and then, I shouted at her.

‘Agnes! You cannot handle the darkness facing you now, not with only your soul left to you!’

{When did I ever fight by considering the odds? I just fought because I had to fight.}

‘Agnes!’ I shouted once again.

{Are you still stupid? If that’s the case, how did you ever beat this big guy? Right now, I will be helpful to you, as you have been to me.}

Contrary to reproaching me, Agnes spoke in a strong voice, somehow praising me for my boldness. I struggled; I wanted to push her away if I could—so that she did not get caught up in this, so that her shining soul did not fall to the irresistible darkness. But now that I was too small and weak, all I could do was shout.

{You’re being a bit loud. Don’t worry—who am I? Wasn’t I the knight who killed Eda, the giant king? Wasn’t I the great warrior wooed by all the knights in the world?}

Though there was only the shapeless light, it seemed as if I could see the image of Agnes, and she seemed annoyed for some reason.

{Now, there is no one else to help you, even though my sharp sword has long ago become a blunted relic.}

I continued to call to Agnes, all the same pleading with her.

{Fuck, stop whining for a second. Because my ears are ringing. I died once anyway, so what is another death?}

'It's not just death!' I shouted angrily. 'You will be completely consumed without even a chance for reincarnation!'

{I won't sit by and see you sacrifice your soul-}

I heard a terrible roar before Agnes could even finish speaking. At the same time, her soul began to shine even more brilliantly.

{If I am destroyed, don't weep. I hate that.}

Darkness rushed in the moment she stopped speaking, and a brilliant golden flash burned brightly as it pushed at the darkness. I knew how this fight would end.

'Agnes! Ann!' I desperately called to her, struggling to stand by her.

But my soul, already damaged and almost lost, could not even move forward. The brilliant golden light began to shake as the darkness raged ever fiercer. Agnes's great soul was shattered and scattered in all directions.

{You are strong! If we had met in life, we would have been good partners!}

Agnes did not back down while her soul was being shaved, winnowed down. She acted as she did in life, but from the start, the results were fixed. The darkness had grown up by consuming the souls I had fed upon in the past, and it was the absolute power in this space. I shouted and shouted, hoping that even now Agnes would withdraw. But she kept fighting, and her soul kept getting smaller.

'Oh no!'

Agnes turned to me.

{If we met when we both were human, it would have been very fun.}

Hearing her warm voice, I gritted my teeth. I now grasped a small piece of her soul in my hand, our most precious moment when we had promised to make it together until the end. To burn that piece, to push it out into the area of darkness…

At that moment, a miracle happened.

{Hah, you pretend to be cool all by yourself.}

A brilliant white flash of light materialized, facing the darkness.

{It's been a long time.}

He was my friend, the founder of the Leonberg Kingdom, and the Dragon Slayer. A bunch of golden rays gathered right next to him. Although the same color as Agnes's soul, it was not as warm, and it felt more detached.

{So the King of Money works on something that brings him no profit for some reason} Dragon Slayer quipped.

{Although I worship money, some situations call for a knife to be drawn without payment. And I owe Gruhorn a debt.} It was the soul of the Mercenary King.

And beside them, countless lights bloomed.

{What debt? Debt for selling Gruhon to someone else?} one of them demanded

{At that time, I was in dire need.}

{Oh, the Mercenary King, greediest bastard in the world, is making some hard excuses} a loud voice piped up. These were all nostalgic voices, so familiar to me. They were the souls of great knights who had been with me in the past.

Dragon Slayer looked at me and said, {You are not alone.}

The other souls booed at his words.

{Oh, you think you look so cool! You, the unscrupulous man, without conscience, who exploited our cute Gruhorn by binding him with a covenant to your descendants.}

{If you really cared, you should have gone out ahead of the rude, swearing lady.}

{Stop!}

The chattering of the souls ceased when someone gave a sharp shout. It was Agnes, and she was shining the same as she had been when first appearing before me.

{Talking comes later} she said. {Now is the time to do what we need to do.}

The souls began to radiate brilliantly in every color of light.

{Go, knights born of the great dawn!}

A brilliant army of light promptly fired out toward the darkness.

CHAPTER 267
IF THE NIGHT IS LONG, THE DREAMS ARE DEEP (6)

As the light blazed, the darkness withdrew. And naturally, where the darkness arose, the light faded.

Countless lights bloomed and were lost. The great darkness had been torn and reformed repeatedly, and it roared fiercely. The light burned brighter and shouted with many voices. Light and darkness hit each other countless times, and fragments of both became scattered. I glanced at the fragments.

Every piece of scattering light contained a portion of life. They were everyone who had been with me, everyone who had walked the road at my side. So I knew—these were invaluable moments for them, and they had to be fierce in every second. I was seeing their blood and sweat, and the glory they had gained after their struggles.

Their brilliant souls were shattered and scattered like dust—all for me.

What the hell was so special about me?

My heart felt as if it was being torn apart. I shouted countless times.

‘Step back! Stop fighting!’

However, not a single one of them listened to me. They made their way into the darkness and fought on. They threw their entire lives at the abyss which I could not resist. Crashing and shattering—light and darkness flickered like that.

‘’Oh greedy king, do not try to appease me,” the sound of a soft song came to my ears. ‘’Unless you offer a whole warehouse of golden and silver treasures… ’’

‘’It’s no more valuable than a copper coin given me by your people.’’

It was a story about the destruction of a kingdom that all have forgotten. A song

about the whims of a profiteer who fought a thousand days for a stained copper coin: it was the [Golden Poetry] of the Mercenary King.

I turned my head, and I saw the man's back, clad in shabby leather armor. The yellow flashes that the man had gathered at the edge of his sword thusly shot out toward the darkness. That was the beginning, for soon, light burst out from all over.

Whenever a light was lost, there was no doubt that a man or woman had perished. There came an enormous knight in iron armor, a sword-swinging madman, a commander in a fancy uniform, and a monster dressed as a clown.

Heroes who had forged their eras or raised their countries sang of the karma achieved in their lives.

The old legends of the world's forgotten heroic poems resounded everywhere, and colorful lights bloomed at the edges of their blades. Sharp, heavy, or flashy—each sword was of a different nature as it penetrated the darkness and tore it apart.

The darkness cried in pain, but I knew… [Heroic] poems could not halt the dark. To chase the beast back into the abyss, more amazing achievements were needed. Feats in a realm that people of the world might call miracles; feats that most humans cannot dare reach.

For example:

''I cut the scales of the dragon that cannot be cut by any sword, and drink its hot blood.''

This was the myth of the great king who killed a dragon. The Dragon Slayer promptly lifted his sword, softly reciting his poem.

''With a searing sword, I finally cut out that heart''

It was the final verse of [Poetry of the Dragon Slayer] that I had barely been able to recite when I had offered my soul as a sacrifice. At that moment, the entire [Myth] materialized in the space.

'Aa, Aa, Aa, Aa!' A white dragon roared as it soared.

It was the Dragon Slayer's unique power, achieved with the karma of slaying the mad

dragon.

{Dragon, rise!}

Sharp claws cut into the pitch blackness. Giant wings tore into the mass of darkness. The dragon's sturdy jaw bit into the neck of the screaming night. The darkness struggled fiercely as it was trampled under the white dragon. Countless tentacles sprung from his body, and these tentacles formed into a sharp spear and penetrated the white dragon. The dragon's shape was scattered.

'Ah ah ah ah!'

Yet, its head remained intact, and the darkness roared fiercely. And then, she came out.

''When I cleanse my sword… ''

''Blood into a river flows… ''

''And the flesh enriches the earth.''

This was one of the five elites who ended the Great War.

''I will renew this land with a giant's blood and flesh.''

Among them, she was called the strongest knight. Agnes Bavaria wielded her sword of Iron Blood, which blazed with light, and she raised it high.

{Sudden Change!}

From up high, she slashed her blade down. At that moment, the great darkness, the vast void-

'Washak!'

…was split asunder. I blankly looked at the crack.

'Quap!'

Someone deftly grabbed me by my back.

‘Wak!’

Then, they threw me aside without saying anything. Through the crack created by Agnes, I heard a voice.

{The debt is paid off.}

The Mercenary King popped his head out from the other side of the shear.

{Bey, Gruhorn.}

The Mercenary King glanced over his shoulder, and he laughed and laughed. Then he united with the darkness, and the other knights once more began to burn up their souls.

‘Oh no!’ I screamed as I headed back toward the knights. But before my feet even stepped beyond the crack, stepped into the void-

‘Chin!’

The crack disappeared. And so, I was left in darkness once more—in a world filled with nothing but greedy predators, with no twinkling stars.

**

I forgot about the passage of time. No, I couldn’t even tell if time passed.

Am I trapped in a single moment, or am I floating in the river of time?

Nothing was for sure; I merely existed—neither alive nor dead, between the abyss and the surface.

Where is that vague boundary?

I wandered and wandered through the empty dark, hoping to get back somehow, hoping to escape the empty space. Even after wandering through the darkness for a long time, I found no way back to them. I existed in a completely isolated reality, knowing that the only way to return to them was to forcefully break through the walls. But now, I didn’t have the power to do that. I was so weak.

Several times I tried to break through the barrier with all my strength, only to realize how insignificant I had become. The feeling of total helplessness that I felt for the first time in my life ate at me. I was exhausted and finally decided to just wrap my knees around each other, curling up into a ball.

The only thing left to me was the shimmering fragment of my soul. I looked into it, endlessly looking back on the life of Adrian Leonberger.

Sometimes I just watched it flow, while at other times, I repeated a certain moment again and again. The happiest moments, the saddest moments, the most joyful moments, and the most sorrowful—I cherished and embraced every instant. It was the only warmth I could feel in this cold reality; it was the only pillar that supported me, sustained me on the brink of collapse.

I grabbed onto the most intense instant of my life and repeated that time indefinitely.

Then, at some point, I became dazed, lost.

What was I doing? What had I been trying to do?

I thought about it, but there was no answer. It was so frustrating that I stood up and sat back down, again and again, never ceasing to worry. I sat blankly, my arms wrapped around my head. My mind was a mess.

Then I walked around for a while but suddenly stopped, feeling uncomfortable. I looked around to identify the source of my discomfiture and finally found it.

In a world of endless emptiness, a small light flickered in one corner. I ran towards the light, finally reached it.

At a small campfire sat a wizard, garbed in a white robe with a hood covering the head. The wizard looked up at me.

“Nice to meet you.”

Her soft voice made me laugh. In this empty world, I was finally becoming mad, but I didn’t mind. It was good to meet a friend in this void, even if that friend was an illusion created by me. It was much better to be with someone like her than to be alone in a world of nothingness.

‘Dump!’

I sat down by the fire.

“I think of the old days. Even when I first met you, you suddenly appeared from the deepest night. At that time, unlike now, I was just a sword.”

“Sure. It was nice then.”

I stroked her chin and stared at her, and Ophelia smiled as she met my eyes.

As we gazed at each other after speaking, I suddenly felt uncomfortable. Then I realized why—I didn’t feel any of the energy peculiar to the High Lich, which should have been felt immediately. Ophelia was as fresh as when we had met four hundred years ago and just as lively.

At first, I figured that because it was an illusion, she could easily possess the veneer of false vitality.

However, as time passed, my sense of discomfort became stronger.

Is the Ophelia in front of me really an illusion?

At first, it was just a simple question, but it soon got me all confused.

“Sometimes, what you see isn’t everything. But sometimes… what you see is everything,” she said with a smile, looking at me. Her words were so clear, her smile so vivid.

I couldn’t help but ask, “Are you really Ophelia?”

She laughed out loud at me.

“Gruhorn. That’s the most ridiculous question you’ve ever asked me.”

Her clear laughter echoed in my ears, and I felt a bit embarrassed.

“But, as always, I will answer your questions with all my heart.”

Ophelia jumped up from her seat.

“I am not an illusion.”

Then she hugged me. The warmth of her body was so vivid that I naturally realized: the Ophelia before me had never been illusory.

“You endured well.”

“What the hell?”

I was confused, both by the way she had appeared in front of me, and the fact that she was alive in here.

“Aren’t you supposed to go back to them?”

Ophelia slipped out of my arms, and then she glanced at me. Seeing her unique golden eyes, I snapped awake.

“Yes! Ophelia! Send me back!”

My heart quickened at the thought that if she had come here looking for me, she would know how to go back.

“You have to hurry!” I urged her. “ Even at this moment…”

“Where are you talking about?”

“That’s, of course… Agnes and the others…”

Ophelia quietly stared at me. Her eyes seemed to tell me that going back wasn’t that easy. I frowned. Then, the moment came when I realized that my head was empty. It felt like I had forgotten something big, something very important and precious.

“I’m late,” Ophelia sighed as she saw me like that. Then suddenly, she looked at my hand.

“But I’m not too late,” she said with a sigh of relief, and I followed her gaze, lowering my head—and stiffened where I was. There was a small, faintly shining fragment that I gripped tightly in my hand so that I would never lose it. The moment I saw that little piece, my heart started throbbing.

“If the night is long, the dreams are deep,” Ophelia whispered into my ear. “But no matter how deep a dream is, there is no dream that one does not wake up from.”

Hearing her strangely clear voice, I raised my head as if possessed. Ophelia looked at me with a gentle smile.

“It’s time to wake up now.”

CHAPTER 268
BE MORE DIGNIFIED THAN ANYONE (1)

Ophelia grabbed my hand with both of hers—with my hand gripping the small fragment.

Her hands began to glow white, and I blankly stared at their light. She guided my hand to my chest, to the left… Finally, my hand touched my heart, holding the faintly glowing, small fragment to it. Thusly, a faint light spread all over my body.

When the light disappeared, I realized what I had lost.

The pieces of my life that I had forgotten for a while, almost eaten by the darkness of the void, experiencing the threat of extinction, finally became part of me again. So, I was able to recall everything I had forgotten. But…

“Now, do you know where you need to go to go back to?”

I was unable to answer Ophelia’s question. The memory of those running toward the expansive darkness was stuck into my heart like a thousand thorns. The image of them struggling with that persistent malice was drawn so vividly in my mind.

I opened and closed my mouth several times. Then, after a while, I bowed my head and gave a curt answer.

“I am dead.”

Ophelia grasped my cheeks with both her hands.

“You can survive if you want to.”

The confidence within her word gladdened me, yet at the same time, I wasn’t happy.

“But when I leave… Agnes… The others…”

The only answer I could give in front of Ophelia was not a direct one, but rather

foolish words—because I couldn't turn away from those who risked annihilation for my sake. She did not blame me for that.

"Gruhorn. You always do that," she sighed. "That's why I can't let you stand still." Ophelia laughed.

"If you were your normal self, I wouldn't be so worried. You are too small and weak now."

Her smile seemed to be somewhat apologetic, and I became nervous.

"Be strong in your mind."

Ophelia again grabbed my cheeks, then put her forehead against mine.

"The things you'll see from now on…"

Her face was close enough that I felt her breath and she looked at me with her unique golden eyes.

"It's going to be more horrible than you thought it would be."

And at that moment, the world before my eyes turned white.

**

Thousands of soldiers wearing black cloaks were gathered in front of the fortress. In front of them, from a high platform, the Duke of the North declared bloody revenge, his face filled with anger and grief. Soldiers and knights raised their spears and swords high and shouted. Thousands of troops began marching out. Crossing the bridge spanning the Rhinethes, they continued to advance. As they marched on, more soldiers and knights continued to gather.

After continuing on apace, they reached a forest where the trees were overgrown with mistletoe. Monsters with dark blue skins blocked off the knights and soldiers. The soldiers leveled their crossbows and poured out bolts, while the lancers, led by Quéon, broke through the center of the monsters.

The Masters gathered their Aura Blades to the edges of their swords and ripped the monsters apart. The battle ended with many humans dead. Those who survived

continued advancing, burning the forest as they did.

The battle with the monsters continued. Countless soldiers who stalked through the forest like ghosts with their crossbows fell. The tireless lancers were surrounded by monsters and died one by one.

Nevertheless, they did not stop.

Ignoring their wounds, seeking victory, they continued to set the forest ablaze as they moved forward. The monsters' resistance intensified.

Some of them were strong enough to deal with even the Masters, who gathered together and faced the mightiest of the beasts. After fighting for a day and night, this monster finally collapsed.

However, the Masters weren't in perfect condition either. One of them wielded a sword shining with moonlight; he had pierced the monster's heart, then he too met his death.

None mourned for him; none gave tribute. They merely marched on. And again, they ran into an army led by a mighty monster. Once more, they won but lost many. One warrior, who blazed as golden as the sun, was struggling with two mighty monsters. She suffered serious injuries and died less than a day later.

Now, only one Master remained.

And in that forest, she fought as if channeling the stars themselves, killing countless monsters with brilliant swordsmanship. But in the final battle, she also suffered greatly, her body torn apart.

The duke, who had cried out for revenge, also became a headless corpse after that battle. The most loyal palace knight died as well, his limbs torn from him on the spot. And so, the war ended.

The forest with its trees and mistletoe burned, and the dark-blue-skinned monsters were annihilated. The surviving monsters scattered and fled.

The army returned immediately, but some knights and soldiers took up crossbows and pursued the fleeing beasts. They disappeared, never to come back. With its sharpest swords broken in this war, the kingdom was completely defeated in a string

of unceasing losses by those who had always aimed for the destruction of Leonberg.

Corpses formed mountains, and blood flowed in rivers.

**

"Kgook!"

I coughed, the breath I had held bursting out from me. It hurt, almost as if my heart had been broken. I forcefully suppressed the pain as my breath came in wild rasps. My eyes couldn't even blink. Whenever I closed them, I saw Bernardo's head drooping, just after he had pierced through the beast's heart. I witnessed Adelia's end, with her struggling in pain and dying slowly.

The final fate of Arwen was to become a cold corpse, all thanks to the machinations of the fallen Elder High Elves.

Vincent's head still rolled across the ground in my mind. I pictured the remains of Carls, who had died while his limbs were being torn from him.

I felt like I might never rise again, so I opened my eyes and breathed hard. Then, after a while, I barely managed to squeeze my mouth open to form words.

"What the hell did you show me? What the hell did I see!"

I suddenly stepped a few feet back from Ophelia, and she stared at me.

"You already know."

Unlike me, who felt terrified, her voice sounded embarrassed.

"That's the future path that the kingdom will walk without you."

Her voice became sharper.

"It is the last battle your knights will ever enter."

Her words pierced my heart deeply. I denied them; it was ridiculous; it was impossible. I didn't sacrifice my soul to see such a future unfold. But the more I tried to deny it, the clearer the future Ophelia had shown me became. Because I knew it

could be no different, for she had foreknowledge with her power of [Shinan].

“Gruhorn. Look at me.”

She forced my motionless head to look at her. I hesitated and resisted, fearing that she would show me a terrible future again, but I finally met her eyes. Her pupils were still, and the ominousness I had imagined was nowhere to be seen.

“The terrible sights you saw are never going to happen.”

My heart had been beating wildly at Ophelia’s words, and my mind had become a mess; both now quickly returned to their original states.

“You… I… I won’t let it happen like that. I won’t just wait and watch,” she said and smiled gently. Right then-

“It’s a really nasty trick.”

A welcome voice came from behind Ophelia’s back.

“Ann!” I turned in the direction of the voice. Agnes, with a somewhat unpleasant-looking face, was approaching Ophelia and me. The Dragon Slayer, the progenitor of the Leonberger family, was also there.

“I guessed it was you,” the king said. “It wouldn’t have been possible to awaken all the deeply slumbering souls without you.”

“I just hope I didn’t interfere with your sleep.”

He and Ophelia exchanged greetings, for they had climbed Mount Seori together four hundred years ago. However, Agnes did not wait too long for them to share in the joy of their reunion.

“Don’t you have to show us your grotesque form? Do you need to make it more disturbing by appearing alive?”

“I guess you don’t like my power very much.”

Despite Agnes’s overbearing reprimand, Ophelia did not show even a bit of agitation.

“I hated the prophets of olden times,” Agnes said. “Even after hearing their foresights, I couldn’t figure out what to think. I felt deceived.” Agnes frowned, and her mood did not seem pleasant.

“I was just worried that a deep-hearted person might miss something important because of his feelings. There was no other meaning,” Ophelia assured her.

“Hey, that thing has been indecisive since time immemorial. He talked about the magic sword and everything and didn’t fully grasp the atmosphere. So, it didn’t get much of nutritional value from us.”

Agnes touched her chin for a moment, muttered ‘Yes’, and spoke on.

“In the end, it was useless. Even if it wasn’t, I had predicted the situation and was about to kick his arse and return him to his original hole.”

Having said that, she glanced at Ophelia, then looked at me.

“Tchu. You’re weak, you’re missing this.”

Agnes gave a short cluck of her tongue and suddenly reached her hand out to me. Seeing the blobs of light floating above it, my eyes widened—because these were the pieces of my soul that had been shattered and swallowed by the darkness.

“How did you do this?”

“Somehow, I split the beast and took it out.”

I fell in love with her words, which she uttered as if they were insignificant. Her attitude was absurd as she spoke of sundering the mighty darkness as if it had been the mere cutting of a fish’s belly on a plate.

“We’re not completely finished with him. We just disabled it for a while. Over time, he will regain his original shape,” Dragon Slayer explained the situation on behalf of Agnes.

“Then the other people…”

“By now, everyone will be recovering from their weakened souls. Well, some of them may have disappeared, but I’m not interested in the weak ones anyway.”

Hearing Agnes's words, I sighed in relief. Contrary to her blunt words, when I looked at her warm expression, I knew everyone else was okay.

"Since when are you so worried about others?" Agnes asked, clucking her tongue as she looked at me.

"Hmm." Then, the Dragon Slayer stepped forward, stretching out his hand. A sliver of a weak soul was floating above it.

"This is not mine…"

"It is the soul of the original owner of your body," he explained as I wondered about the soul's identity. "The weak guy had shot out at the terrifying darkness by himself and was eventually consumed by the void, losing his ego. All that remains are weak thoughts and memories."

"Why give this to me?"

"It will be necessary to get back to where you were."

Before I could even say anything, Agnes took the piece and put it to my chest.

"Ah, stay still. Think of it as a remedy that you don't have to eat. There is nothing more to say."

When I looked at my chest with a grim face, the pieces had already been absorbed into my body, leaving no trace.

I looked at Agnes and gave an unsure laugh when the Dragon Slayer suddenly reached out his hand again.

"I feel the weight of the burden that you had to bear due to my excessive greed. You can think that it because I am selfish, but honestly, I think you are very lucky in the kingdom you are in. Please, the kingdom-"

"This bastard is still unconscious, and already carrying enough luggage. Shut up… Fuck. Because he still has to get out of here."

Bearing the brunt of Agnes's scolding, the Dragon Slayer's face became hot. His peculiar coercion as a knight, which had reached [Mythic] level, slowly spread out.

“Hasn’t he already done well enough?” Agnes demanded. “Open your eyes. You have to have a conscience.”

The king nodded at her criticism, spat out a pained grunt, and looked at me again. Then he suddenly reached out his hand.

“I’m sorry. And thank you.”

It took me a moment to realize the meaning of his gesture; I also reached out my hand and gripped his large palm.

“Get out of here. Don’t pretend you have a conscience now.” Agnes pushed him away and came to stand in front of me.

“Take a good meal and eat when you wake up. This prince doesn’t have good blood, and his body isn’t good enough.”

“It’s still growing,” I protested.

“Fuck, seems the same to me. Maybe after your metamorphosis, you barely escaped being a dwarf.”

I was going to say something, upset at her attitude of mocking me, with the tips of her mouth curled into a smirk.

‘Warak!’

But then, Agnes hugged me.

“Don’t feel that you’re somebody else’s plaything anymore, don’t notice such things. Live confidently. Live this single life you have properly. Live with an abundance of happiness so that you don’t have any regrets later. Do everything that others do. Do everything that others have not done.”

Hearing her soft voice, I also raised my arms and carefully hugged her back.

“You deserve it,” she said as she grabbed my two shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Not as Gruhorn, but as Adrian Leonberger.”

Agnes pulled me toward her, and an unfamiliar sensation touched my forehead.

“Enjoy all the happiness you can attain as a human being.”

Before I even realized what was happening, Agnes grabbed me with force.

“Bye.”

Then she hurled me aside, throwing me away-

“Huh?”

…toward a place where there was a pure white light that I had not known had come into being.

“See you again. Ian.”

As Agnes said goodbye behind my back, I was sucked into the light.

**

“Ah…”

When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on my fluffy bed. While directionlessly shifting my eyes, I heard a voice come from nearby.

“I- Your Highness?”

When I turned my head, Adelia was staring at me with a ghostly face. Tears quickly filled her drooping, haggard eyes.

“Your Highness! Your Highness! Your Highness!”

She ran into my arms, her face wet with tears, her nose runny. I hated it, but she stubbornly buried herself into my arms.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!” Adelia cried sadly in my embrace.

“What? His Highness?”

I heard the sound of footsteps and voices outside the door, and this made me laugh.

It felt like I had finally come home after a long time.

CHAPTER 269
BE MORE DIGNIFIED THAN ANYONE (2)

The door soon burst open, and a handsome court knight ran into the room, looked at me, his expression eventually hardening.

“Carls.”

No matter how many times I called his name, he did not approach, rather standing there for a long time.

‘Dump!’

Then, he suddenly got down on his knees.

“…I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

The feelings contained in the sorrowed words that he barely managed to utter were so complicated that they ate even at my heart. I felt that I wanted to reach out and raise him to his feet right away, but my body refused to obey. Even Adelia, who was clinging to me, was already too much of a match for my fatigue to contend with. By that time, I had already given up on trying to push her away. My clothes had long since become wet from her tears and runny nose anyway, so I didn’t even feel like pushing the matter any farther.

“Stand up, Carls.”

Inevitably, I encouraged him to rise, but Carls was more solid than a stone statue. He shook his head, and I sighed as I looked at him when-

‘Kudangtang’

Someone opened the door loudly and entered the room.

“My lord! Ah! Ah!”

It was the Marquis of Bielefeld. However, his usually neat appearance was truly a spectacle to behold. His clothes were crumpled, and his hair, not properly trimmed, was all messed up. Tears lingered in his eyes, so I tried not to laugh at once. Forcing myself to hold back my laughter, I gently spoke to the marquis.

“Will you raise up Carls next to you there? I haven’t slept properly and skipped some meals, so I’m afraid I’ll end up falling.”

The marshal opened his eyes wide. Carls also raised his head, trembling as if he had been hit by a lightning bolt. Even Adelia, who was wriggling in my arms, looked up at me as she stemmed her tears.

“Why?” I demanded with a frown. I couldn’t understand why they found my words to be so amazing. Meanwhile, Carls, who seemed as if he would kneel there for days, arose.

“I’m sorry. Recent events have caused great concern,” Carls stated.

“Well, so far, we all feel that way,” the marquis brusquely answered Carls, and I felt that he spoke more openly than was necessary. I turned my head to Bielefeld.

“By the way, seeing you appear so quickly, it looks like you were in my palace.”

“I… happened to be here,” the old man answered, and I saw he tried to hide his face from me. I felt even more troubled about his attitude. While I blatantly stared at the marquis, a nasty smell pierced into my nose.

“Did you drink?”

“Because of my heart…” Bielefeld did not deny my observation.

“I think you’ve been drinking my liquor,” I told him, narrowing my eyes.

“That’s not what matters now!” the marquis suddenly shouted.

While I, the owner, had lost my mind, the thief had drunk my alcohol at will. I saw that he shuffled his feet, and wondered if he was back to his bad old habits, but it didn’t seem like it. Bielefeld’s expression was too serious for that.

“The Duke of the North has said he will take revenge for your Highness, and is

attracting troops to his cause!"

My heart pounded, sinking into my chest. My head was dizzy. I saw Vincent, his neckless body, his head rolling over the floor before me. My breath ran out.

"Well, Your Highness?"

Hearing Adelia's voice, I snapped awake. It seemed that I had inadvertently hugged her tighter, squeezing her against me. She frowned, and I saw subtle traces of pain on her face.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Adelia shook her head, pulled out a handkerchief, and wiped the sweat from my forehead. Her feelings of concern and dearness were so clearly conveyed by her gentle touches that I was able to forget, if only a little, about the terrible visions that had beset my mind. However, the cold panic in my heart remained the same.

"Where's Vincent now?" I asked in a cracking voice, and the old man's mouth clenched shut tighter. He had lost the self-confidence he had possessed when I had just woke up, and it took him several attempts before I was finally able to hear his answer.

"He is stationed at Templar Castle with the northern army. His Majesty has left the palace to persuade the duke from his course of action."

I became out of breath again. Thoughts of Vincent occupied my mind, he who had proclaimed bloody revenge along with countless frontline soldiers. It seemed that the scene I saw had happened around this time, and my heart throbbed at the thought. At the same time, I was relieved. Inwardly, I constantly told myself that I was glad to wake up now, glad that I was not too late.

After a while, I said to the marquis, "Quickly, send a messenger."

Bielefeld didn't ask me what to say because both he and I knew that all that was needed was word that I had woken up, word that I was waiting for Vincent. That simple message would be enough for the duke, maddened by his drive for revenge, to come to his senses.

The marquis didn't hesitate, and immediately ordered a nearby palace knight to find

the sharpest riders among the cavalry squadrons and send them out as messengers.

'…er… sir… '

At that moment, I heard a faint voice come from outside the palace.

'…ther!… Brother!'

Little by little, the voice got closer, and it seemed as desperate as the quacking of an abandoned duckling looking for its mother.

"It seems that his Highness the Second Prince also heard the news," the old marshal said with a bloody smile, also having heard the voice.

"Brother!"

And soon after, the master of the voice appeared.

"Maximil-"

Before I was finished speaking, Maximilian had already run into my arms.

"Brother! Brother!"

He even forgot to keep his face princely as he sorrowfully wept, calling out to me countless times.

"Brother!"

"Okay-"

"Brother! Brother!"

"Yes, here I am."

I tried to express my gratitude for his meaningless, fervent outcries "Brother! Brother!"

However, it was all too much, and I became completely exhausted by Maximilian calling me over a hundred times.

“You’re driving me crazy.”

I looked at Maximilian, who clung to me like a sticky leech, and I looked at Adelia, right next to him.

As I watched them both, occupied by sharing the left and right of my body like brother and sister, a sigh came from me. Looking at me like that, Bielefeld chuckled, then laughed.

“Marquis- Don’t laugh like that. What did you do?”

“This is all your Highness’s own work.”

“Then, will they keep coming to see me like this?”

“Just be patient.”

For some reason, Bielefeld’s way of trying to calm me was very annoying, but he wasn’t really wrong, so I just repeatedly sighed. And so, countless people visited my palace. However, the marquis made sure all of them left, saying that I needed absolute stability considering my condition after just waking up. This time, I felt grateful toward the marquis.

If everyone had pushed into my room at once, I would have soon lost the joy of life.

Night came.

Maximilian, who had resisted leaving until the end, had also gotten dragged away by Bielefeld, and only Adelia remained by my side. I asked her what had happened after I had failed to wake up. Holding my hand firmly, Adelia looked at me with her puffy eyes. After a long time, still looking at me, she said that I had been dead, and was then revived once again.

It was only then that I realized how little she knew. However, she was Adelia, not anyone else. She didn’t know how the fundamentals of mana and souls functioned, and she must have stuck by my side, crying all the time.

“Yeah. What’s important is not the past.”

I reached out and touched Adelia’s cheek, and she rested her face lightly on my hand.

She looked sad as my fingertips touched her skin; her once-plump cheeks were so thin.

“Now it’s done. It’s done, and I’m back.”

Adelia, whose tears always came so quickly, nodded her head at my words. She squeezed her lips as if she would burst out crying right away. I whispered to her that it was okay again and again. How much time passed with the two of us like that?

Adelia fell asleep. I haven’t been able to get proper sleep for a while, but I felt relaxed. While trying to stand up, I realized that she was still tightly gripping my hand in sleep, laying on her back.

“Don’t just stand there, come in,” I said. I stared at the door; everything was quiet, I didn’t hear the person answer.

“Will you come in?” I said again, not giving up. The person must have been very hesitant, for the door opened only after a long time. Beyond the open portal, I saw a woman who was dear to me. It was Arwen. She stood tall within the doorframe, just looking at me. Her usual piercing eyes were lowered as if she had committed some great sin, and she constantly touched her one hand with the other.

I sighed.

Arwen Kirgayen, as I remembered her, was a knight more confident than any other; now, she looked small and slender. She hadn’t known back then what I was asking of her, and she surely believed my death was partly because of her. All of this must have brought great hurt to her heart, and many troubles. She must have pushed herself endlessly down because of her guilt at having brought me to my death. As I looked at her emaciated form, I wondered if I had asked too much of her.

I opened my mouth again and again, not able to think about what I could say to comfort her.

“It won’t happen again.”

I only spoke after a long time, and the words I uttered were very insignificant in my opinion. Arwen still didn’t answer me.

She just looked at me now and again, constantly gazing down. Numerous emotions

flared up in her eyes and then gradually faded. Finally, her feelings became completely imperceptible.

“You are back well.”

Her words, which she hesitated a long while before uttering, were as crude as mine. However, neither one of us rebuked the other for our shared crudeness. We merely looked at each other for a long time.

Then, after a while, she silently nodded, closed the door behind her, and was gone.

I sighed without thinking and suddenly saw Adelia’s eyes move beneath her eyelids. She had apparently awakened to the sound of Arwen and I speaking. I didn’t know why I thought about it, but the terrible future Ophelia had shown me came to my mind. In that reality, Adelia had regarded Arwen as her enemy. I didn’t know for sure but had I never woken up, Adelia would have hurt Arwen countless times with words that were contrary to her nature.

That might be why she did not have the courage to face Arwen this night.

“It’s all my fault.”

I still held onto Adelia’s hand, with her eyes remaining closed.

“I did something that I could do to no one else.”

I whispered again and again until Adelia once more fell asleep.

**

The next day, as the sun rose, Bernardo Eli visited my palace.

The smell of alcohol emanated from his entire body, and I figured he had still been drinking before hearing the news and running straight here.

“Do some washing and then come back.”

Even in the face of my rebuke, Eli just blankly stared at me.

“You… It’s really true what they told me?”

Then, after a time, still stupefied, he spoke. I could see the emotions on his face. That was the nice thing about Eli.

“Then who else can I be?” I inquired.

At my words, Eli bared his teeth and breathed heavily. His red face seemed as if it would shed tears right away.

“Really!” He exclaimed.

“What really?”

“Really, really!”

Eli, repeating the same words without end, suddenly raised his hands and ran to me—as if he would hug me right away.

“No!”

However, he was stopped by Adelia before even reaching me.

“Why do you bring that filthy smell closer?”

Faced with Adelia’s innocent words, his face showed his shock.

“I… I’ll be back soon.”

The guy left without saying goodbye, and soon returned dressed in clothes that were not soaked in alcohol.

“Is he decent now?” I asked quietly, meeting Adelia’s eyes. She gave a small nod.

“My lord, ah!” Eli cried.

“Don’t come! Just stay there!” I shouted at him with disgust.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have a hug?”

I neatly disregarded the guy’s question, which he asked with a wounded expression.

CHAPTER 270
BE MORE DIGNIFIED THAN ANYONE (3)

At first, when the Crown Prince awoke, Adelia Bavaria just felt happy. However, her joy soon passed, and her heart had begun to sink. It all happened when the prince said, “Will you raise up Carls next to you there? I haven’t slept properly and skipped some meals.”

The Crown Prince’s face was filled with anxiety when he said it was painful for him to see the proud Carls kneeling.

“I’m afraid I’ll fall.”

Hearing that, Adelia stopped her tears for the first time and whispered to herself that she was scared. The prince had never said anything like that, even when Winter Castle had fallen to the army of countless orcs, or when he went forth from the castle, determined to deal with the Warlord. Everyone knew this.

“Why?”

Only the Crown Prince himself was unaware of this fact. Adelia Bavaria couldn’t even tell him that he did not know; such words felt wrong in her mouth. For her, it would be the greatest disrespect to commit.

And so, while she kept her mouth shut, she looked at the prince’s face, which was pale and tired after hearing the news of Winter Castle’s duke. Adelia was not familiar with the prince having such a face.

In the deep of night, when he groaned and moaned without anyone knowing, his face looked the same. This was the first time Adelia saw him show such a weak face in his waking hours.

His Highness’s behavior, clenching her hard enough that it hurt, was also different from usual. Somehow, the prince looked smaller today. She could see he did not feel well with his emaciated face and thin body.

Unlike usual, his expressions changed countless times within a short period, and the anxiety that was constantly there made him look diminished. That was what made Adelia afraid, and she couldn't even think of leaving his side. Lying next to him, she drifted out of sleep. She heard the prince talk to someone. Keeping her eyes shut, Adelia gauged the energy of the late-night visitor. A person possessing unique, sharp energy stood by the door. It was not difficult to guess who it was: Arwen Kirgayen, the only one whose energy was this sharp. Adelia closed her eyes even tighter.

Right now, Arwen was not someone that Adelia wanted to encounter. Why did she, who had been stuck in her room all this time, come to visit the palace this late, without anyone knowing?

To Adelia, who had poured out curses and harsh words, Lady Arwen had said that she would be leaving for her family's fortress soon. One fact Adelia had known from the very beginning was that when everyone was unsure and hesitated, Arwen had stepped up and carried such a heavy burden. After the events, Adelia couldn't live with herself because she had failed to protect the prince, and she hated herself because she had not even fulfilled his final request. This made Adelia spit out her resentment at one she had so sincerely loved.

Had Arwen made excuses in the face of Adelia's great anger, she would have felt a little less guilty. But the honest woman had stood there, enduring all the resentment silently. This had made Adelia even more embarrassed and regretful. She knew it was stupid and selfish for her to be so hateful.

It was then that a hand had clenched Adelia's tightly, energetically—the Crown Prince's.

"It's all my fault."

His voice was full of regret and guilt.

"I did something that I could do to no one else."

At the same time, his voice was also stronger than ever. Adelia couldn't stand it anymore, even in her semi-wakeful state. She opened her eyes; so near that she could touch his face were she to reach out, was the Crown Prince. The twenty-two-year-old prince seemed as if he was looking at a faraway place, and his gaze remained unprecedented, solid.

**

Not long after Adelia again woke up, Bernardo Eli arrived. He stood in front of the prince, attempting to hug him, who had just woken up, with a liquor-smelling body. The prince merely told him to go wash and change his clothes, and Adelia feared an energetic hug would damage the prince's weakened body. Eli acted as if he was shocked, and left. However, he soon reappeared, his appearance improved, and he still wanted to embrace the prince.

"Don't come! Just stay there!"

"Wouldn't it be nice to have a hug?"

Adelia couldn't stop herself from laughing, finding Eli's persistence ridiculous.

"Yeah, you have to laugh like that," the prince told her.

Even in the middle of the prince's quarrel with Eli, Adelia continued to laugh, liking his warm words and improved disposition.

"Aren't you too discriminatory? Why reject me?" Eli asked as he looked at the prince.

"Does it hurt your heart?"

His Highness was just like his former self. Eli, though, despite his profanity and ire at the prince's supposed lack of selflessness, seemed very grateful today that his master yet lived.

"I'm going." Eli, who had been begging for a long time, woke up.

"Don't you want me to hug you?" he tried one last time.

"I won't let you hold me."

"I'm really going."

"Go."

It felt a little regretful for Adelia to see that Eli was about to leave the room, and she regretted that the prince's lively words would come to an end.

“You better never die, Bernardo.” It was then that the Crown Prince spoke.

Stopping at the door, Eli looked back. “Until the time that the Eli family is reborn as the best family of knights on the continent, you may not die, you must not be killed.”

“I am greedy not to die—so, am I fated to live forever?”

Eli, who had stood blank for a while, unable to understand, distorted his expression.

“Look to the future!” the prince urged. “Soon, the day will come when everyone in the world will call the Eli family the best!”

Then he again told Eli not to die.

“Don’t face some blue-skinned monster, with both of you stabbing each other in the heart, with you dying a useless death.”

Eli’s expression looked strange as he heard such a strangely detailed scenario.

“Is that a bad story you’re telling, or are you worried?” Eli asked

“It means don’t die by getting your heart pierced.”

The prince repeated the same request over and over again: “Don’t die with a pierced heart.”

“I never once planned on dying like that. So get rid of your anxiety, if you really are anxious,” Eli grumbled with a sad face, then left.

“Adelia.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“You don’t die, either.”

Adelia nodded with a grim face, feeling the desperate anxiety contained within the prince’s words. She promised that she would never leave him alone.

“You must not die without closing your eyes within half a day, crying in pain, bleeding from stab wounds in each arm and leg, and your chest and waist

respectively. Yeah… Never die like that."

Although the example was overly detailed, Adelia did not speak, fearing that she might refuse an order by doing so.

"You look uncomfortable. You're not the one with all the tears and snot on them, so it doesn't make sense," the prince said jokingly.

Adelia, remembering that she had not taken care of the prince because everything had been so busy, prepared to change his clothes as always. When she began, she suddenly hardened.

"What?" The prince looked at her, asking what was wrong, but she didn't answer—no, she couldn't answer.

The prince was supposed to have his funeral in three days, and the clothes he wore could be said to be his burial shroud.

"But… I said I hate white clothes, so what is this I'm wearing?"

"I'll help you change!"

Hearing his words, Adelia hastily helped the Crown Prince remove his clothes—so that he would never realize the nature of the garb he was wearing. It was a close call, Adelia thought.

**

It was from that day on that the Crown Prince told people they should not die, giving strangely detailed examples to each person he met.

"Don't die miserably with your limbs cut off, laying on the ground next to a pile of corpses, Carls."

"I… Yes, Your Highness."

"Never."

"Yes, I'll never die like that."

During those times, the people looked very uncomfortable but facing the Crown Prince, they only replied that they would not die so, for he was full of pure goodwill.

Two days later, when Duke Balahard and the king finally reached the capital, Adelia suddenly realized a surprising fact: during the past two days, the Crown Prince had never expressed feelings of being cramped and wanting to go out. He didn't even ask where his sword was, which he would normally seek first. He just laughed and chatted with those who had come to him.

Adelia knew it was entirely impossible, for the Crown Prince was unable to remain still even for a while. Perhaps the real miracle was not that he had returned from death, but that he was maintaining a calm demeanor at present. The palace knight Carls Ulrich, whose eyes unexpectedly met Adelia's, shook his head quietly. His eyes told her that he knew of her feelings, but that he did not want to provoke the quiet prince by asking about it. So, she, too, forcibly erased the doubts that had popped into her mind. Good things, pleasant things—she recalled only that.

That evening, those who had departed from the capital soon returned.

'Chuck! Chuck! Chuck!'

Then, there came heavy footsteps, and someone opened the door; it was the duke. Vincent had not even brushed the dust from his shoulders and head, and he just stood before the door looking at the prince. No, he stared.

The king appeared later and stumbled when he saw his eldest son lying in bed and staring at him.

"Sir Schmilde… Am I seeing correctly?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then, you mean that the man over there is my son?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The king approached and touched the prince's face.

"You are really Ian, right?"

Instead of answering, the prince smiled gently—a warm smile that he had never before shown to his father. The king opened and closed his mouth several times, and then he hugged his firstborn, careful not to harm him in any way possible. The Crown Prince, in his father's arms, then raised his hand. He wanted to reach out and hug his father, but that proved to be quite difficult.

The king, who had been holding the Crown Prince for a long time, quietly released him from the embrace and withdrew.

"Your Majesty. I am not a man of many words, I don't want to be, but I think I should be so now." It was then that Duke Balahard spoke. He was terribly polite, yet his voice was strangely cold.

"I think the title of Duke of the North that I renounced will be absolutely necessary within this moment."

"In the first place, I never retracted your title," the king said.

"I'm still a duke. That's fortunate," Vincent coldly laughed and entered the room, his armor rattling. "If I admonish a person who has already strayed, now that I know my position here, will your Majesty rebuke me for my blasphemy?"

"I have pledged not to look at your sins unless we speak of your recent controversial attempt of taking the ranks of the northern army into the forest. However, what you want to do is not that, but rather to condemn your cousin, who is like a brother to you, for his transgressions."

"Now, wait…" The Crown Prince protested, only then noticing the unusual atmosphere, but no one listened.

Duke Balahard went to stand in front of the prince, then he began pouring out words in a ferocious voice. These were words far too disrespectful to say to a country's Crown Prince. At the same time, despite their coldness, they were also words everyone wanted to say. Even Adelia unwillingly cheered for Duke Balahard as she watched.

"Uh, ah…" The Crown Prince began to mutter stupid sounds, not knowing why such terrifying words were pouring from the duke's mouth.

"Woo," Vincent took a rough breath after releasing the words he had held inside

himself for a long time. His eyes, staring at the Crown Prince, were cold as ice. Yet, they did no stay like that for long, for warmth quickly arose in the duke's eyes.

"So…"

'Warak!'

With an attitude that was now more like melting snow, the duke hugged the Crown Prince.

"Don't be like that again."

At this, the prince gave no answer.

"Thank you for coming back, your Highness."

The prince's face remained blank, almost as if his soul had escaped from him.

CHAPTER 271
BE MORE DIGNIFIED THAN ANYONE (4)

Vincent Balahard, like most of the citizens within the kingdom, did not believe in God.

“His Highness has awakened!”

That was, at least, until a messenger came from the capital.

“God! Thank you!” He expressed his gratitude for the first time. “I will go to the royal capital… the capital.”

He went straight to the city, not even remembering when he had left the fortress and how he eventually reached the capital. When he snapped awake, he found that he had already arrived at the prince’s palace.

“His Highness is waiting.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute.”

The Crown Prince, who he had wanted to live so much, was waiting. Of course, Vincent should have been happy, and he knew he had no time to delay. Yet, once inside, he stopped, seemingly looking terrified. The image of the prince smiling brightly as he stuck his sword into his chest remained like a bad vision. The overflowing vitality and spirit of the prince had been clearly felt then, as well as the appearance of his drooping body; it was all still fresh in Vincent’s mind.

He could not forget the sight of the prince lying in his bed with closed eyes.

Suddenly, Vincent thought that all of this might be somebody’s ploy to prevent the northern army’s advance. He thought that the Crown Prince might be in the same state as he had been when Vincent had left the palace. So, he couldn’t go inside. Maybe his terrible imagination would become reality, then.

“Duke of the North?”

By that time, doubts had arisen in the palace knight's face, and Vincent Balahard was barely able to settle his heart.

'Chuck!'

The one step he took then took more courage than any other step he had ever taken. His slow pace gradually accelerated.

'Chuck! Chuck! Chuck!'

Then, he almost started running. Finally arriving at the prince's residence, he froze in front of the door. There lay the Crown Prince. Despite being remarkably emaciated, the prince breathed and had open eyes, looking at Vincent from the bed. The moment he saw the prince, feelings of sorrow raged within Vincent.

It was very regrettable that the prince, who had never been able to remain still for a moment, had suffered such an accident, now lying in bed without strength and looking noticeably thin. At the same time, a great rage rose inside Vincent's heart. If he didn't get it all out right now, the stupid prince would throw his life away again. He would, as a matter of course, plunge a blade into his chest for the sake of his cause.

It should never happen again; if someone had to die, Vincent determined that it would be himself. To make sure of that, he had to change the prince's habits right away. His cousin, his younger brother, who considered his life to be insignificant, had to be firmly instructed on how to avoid accidents, even though he might hate the harsh and scathing words. Vincent pulled all the words he wanted to say from his heart, stopped his thought processes, roughly wrapped the words together, and poured them out.

The Crown Prince was completely shocked. His face showed, without a doubt, that he had not expected his dear cousin would act like this. Vincent was relieved and his anger subsided. After it disappeared, only joy filled him.

"Thank you for coming back, Your Highness."

And so, he hugged him and told him it was well that he had returned.

The prince was silent, still looking blankly on with an expressionless face. After a while, still confused, he spoke.

“Vincent. You’re very good with harsh words.”

“When it comes to filthy mouths, the Balahard Rangers are the best in the kingdom. And don’t forget that I was once a ranger.”

Vincent’s words had not just been harsh; they had also been a warning, delivered with swear words, that the same thing should not be repeated in the future.

“I haven’t heard many rangers swear at all,” the prince grumbled, pouting.

“The sneaky guys pretend to be meek only in front of your Highness.”

“Why?”

“Well, there are a number of reasons. It may be that they take into account that your Highness is royalty, or it may be a careful habit they have maintained ever since you first came to Winter Castle as a child.”

Before the prince, who was struck by the word ‘child’, even opened his mouth, Vincent spoke on. “For your information, Jordan is the number one curser in Balahard. When I hear him curse, it feels as if my ears are rotting. If swearing was measured in levels, I’m sure Jordan would be a master. Even rangers who live with such words in their mouths fold whenever they hear Jordan.”

“Hoh. Jordan?”

Curiosity arose in the prince’s eyes. His face clearly showed his interest in wanting to hear Jordan’s rotten curses.

The frivolous Ranger Company Commander had to be sent very far away so as not to show off his accursed skill in front of the Crown Prince, Vincent thought to himself. After determining the poor ranger’s fate, he hurriedly decided that it was now time to change the topic.

“I’m sure you’ve heard enough from me anyway. Your Highness is the who doesn’t listen, not the one with dark speech.”

“For once, I understand that I should not carelessly punish my body, and if I do so without consulting with others, I’ll be punished.”

“That’s it—you’ve figured out that point.”

The Crown Prince gave off a crippled impression, like a small child who did not feel pleased with an adult’s tyrannical attitude. Vincent could not ask if he was all right, for he himself had been engulfed in private emotions and tried to start a great war, a fault of his which was by no means small. For Vincent, the prince’s words up till now had made him feel that his plan would not have worked. And the prince did speak of this.

“If you were alone,” he said, “I would say that it was your private quest. But once you make it something that everyone wants, it is no longer your private emotions, but a collective cause.”

“Your Highness makes it sound dry, yet your Highness is a man of Balahard.”

It was the tradition of Balahard to comfort the spirits of the dead with the blood of enemies, and so express one’s condolences and remembrance. There was no room for anyone to intervene in such vengeance. Vincent knew it was a disrespectful thing to say in front of the king, but he did so without hesitation. The king did not blame him for it; he was probably smiling, Vincent guessed. As long as Balahard blood, inherited from his mother, flowed through the firstborn son of the king, he would give full support for Balahard. Their ties were close and strong. Indeed, it was true.

Yet Vincent, a Balahard, still regarded the Crown Prince as a stranger during most times.

“Anyway, such a cause is tradition. And… whatever. It’s meaningless now that your Highness has returned to life.”

The slightly rigid atmosphere only then relaxed. Those who had stepped back entered the conversation, celebrating and welcoming the prince’s survival. How much time passed like that?

The Crown Prince had begun to doze off, simply answering other’s questions as he sat in his bed. In the meantime, he seemed more and more exhausted. Eventually, those that saw the prince’s head drooping, with him falling asleep, silently glanced at him and then withdrew.

Vincent, who remained until the end, watched Adelia Bavaria comfortably lay the Crown Prince against his cushions, then he too slipped away.

‘Chuck! Chuck! Chuck!’

Even taking great care, he could not prevent his armor from clanging. And this was what woke the prince up.

“Vincent,” the prince called to him in a drowsy voice. “Don’t die by getting your neck chopped off.”

“…”

“Don’t die with your head rolling over the ground…”

Vincent tried to answer such an ominous warning, but instead, he shut his mouth. The prince ended up falling asleep again.

“Well… head… can’t be cut off.”

As the prince fell asleep, he muttered, and Vincent shook his head. So, he’s saying it’s okay for anything but my head to be severed, Vincent mused?

When he went through the door, Adelia, who had arranged the prince’s bed, followed him.

Vincent had something to ask her, so he glanced through the door, then did so.

“When last did you that?”

Adelia’s face quickly darkened.

“That’s the first time since his Highness woke up.”

“He lies down all the time?”

“Yes. He’s been like that all the time. There weren’t many times he got out of bed, he spends most of the day lying down like that.”

Vincent frowned.

“And…”

Looking at him, Adelia hesitated several times before speaking.

“Since waking up, His Highness has not once asked for his sword.”

Vincent stiffened where he stood. An ominous feeling passed through his imagination; he made a terrible assumption that he hoped would never prove true.

“His Highness is still awakening, so don’t be too concerned.”

He struggled to shake off the nasty premonition that floated within his mind.

“Look out for his Highness, don’t take your eyes off him for a moment.”

And he asked again and again: “Call me right away when something happens.”

**

Adelia took a light nap, keeping her ears perked. She had to be attentive for if anything was to go wrong with the prince’s body so that she could act at any time. However, in recent days her body had become more fatigued, a bundle of nerves, and contrary to her will, her mind sank into a deep sleep.

‘Drrooro!’

“Oh.”

She awoke, upset that she had been snoring, and looked over the bed reflexively.

“Uh?”

Adelia hardened, for the prince, who had been sleeping like the dead, had disappeared somewhere. She stood up at once, immediately leaving the room. She opened her mouth to announce the prince’s absence when-

‘Chin!’

Someone closed it. Reflexively, she grabbed the hand over her mouth and twisted it, with her other hand drawing the dagger hidden within her clothes, pointing it at her opponent. However, she did not stab out, for the person reflected in the moonlight was someone she knew well. Gunn, the half-elf serving the prince, stood there. Adelia

hurriedly released her grasp on Gunn, seeing that her face was twisted by the pain from her wrenched arm.

The half-elf, once released, quietly touched her lips, then reached out her hand, pointing. Adelia saw the garden and the shadows of people hiding among the bushes. The palace knights, the prince's knights, and even the only duke in the kingdom were hiding, looking in the same direction. Adelia shifted her eyes and followed their gaze.

There stood the prince in one corner of the deeply shaded garden. He blankly stared at the sky, constantly muttering to himself. Instinctively marshaling her attention, Adelia came to hear his words.

The Crown Prince lamented that the full moon could not light the sky no matter its brightness, and groaned, bemoaning the fact that he could never again witness the white night.

Adelia couldn't understand any of his words. Nevertheless, she clearly felt the emotions contained within them.

Out of nowhere, her head started hurting, and her eyes filled with tears, guided by unknowable emotions. With sullen eyes, she looked at the prince. Without a word, he started moving, almost staggering, no longer looking at the sky.

'Tuk tuk!'

As Adelia stared at him, the half-elf tapped her on the shoulder.

(Quickly. To the room.)

Seeing her silent gesture, Adelia hurried to the room. In the middle of her rush, she changed tack and entered the room through the window so that the Crown Prince would not notice that she had left. She then put her head on a pillow and closed her eyes.

'Dumf dumf!'

She heard footsteps.

'Shup!'

The noise of the blanket being lifted came to her ears and, after a while, the sound of rhythmic breathing. Adelia quietly opened her eyes, seeing that the prince had fallen asleep, clearly not knowing what had just happened. Adelia looked at him with a gloomy face. While she had desperately tried keeping the Crown Prince from noticing, she had hoped that her efforts would be in vain. Were the Crown Prince in his usual condition, he would've noticed. No matter how sneaky she was, she believed that she would be unable to fool the prince's eyes and ears, even if she brazenly pretended to be asleep. She had been certain of it, yet the Crown Prince didn't notice anything. Her movement, her shallow breaths, even the presence of those who had poorly hidden themselves in the shade of the garden—he had noticed nothing.

That was never a good sign.

**

The morning was still dark when the guests came with horrified faces; those who had hid in the garden the night before to watch the prince. He smiled and welcomed them. However, even with his show of hospitality, their faces remained consistently stiff.

"What? What is happening?" He asked, frowning, only then noticing their expressions. Their stern faces had now become completely frozen.

"What the hell is it?" The prince repeatedly asked, but they merely looked at one another, and none of them stepped forward with an answer.

In such an uncomfortable silence, the prince reached out his hand and stabbed it into Bernardo Eli's belly.

"Say it."

Surprised, Eli shouted, "Ho! Maybe… you cannot use your sword!"

The entire room froze upon so an explicit and direct utterance.

"What else do you have to say? You all rushed here early in the morning, so I thought it was a big deal again," the prince responded in a shy manner, and the knights all sighed in relief.

“But how did you know?”

So when the Crown Prince again spoke, no one immediately grasped the meaning of his query.

“What do you mean?” Bernardo Eli asked.

“What do you mean, what do I mean? I mean, I can’t use my sword,” the prince replied, as if it was no big deal, and yet he said this in a gloomy tone.

CHAPTER 272
BE MORE DIGNIFIED THAN ANYONE (5)

Just because the speaker felt embarrassed didn't mean that the listeners could remain calm.

"Well, how about poems?" Bernardo Eli asked, as if he was having a seizure.

"I can't use them. My mana heart is completely broken."

The prince was still calm. His attitude was so carefree that everyone even wondered if something had happened to his head, what with him saying that he had lost something so important. Thinking that the prince's attitude was surreal, not fitting the situation, Eli could not accept his words.

"You're kidding."

Instead of answering, the prince looked at Eli with an honest gaze.

'Cheolkup!'

Bernardo Eli suddenly drew his sword, then held it out before him.

"What are you doing?"

"I know you're just kidding."

"I'm not joking about this."

"No, it should be a joke."

At this, Eli raised his sword again.

"Show me your Aura Blade, or a sword aura," he said, his face filled with desperation.

The prince sighed and grabbed the sword.

‘Tuk!’

However, the sword dropped to the bed, not staying in the prince’s hand.

“What are you doing?”

Eli picked up the sword again and forced it into the prince’s grasp.

‘Gank!’

The sword forged by meisters clattered to the floor. Bernardo Eli, drained by hearing the sound, squeezed his lips.

“Is it not the sword you normally use? If so, I will bring your Highness’s sword now and-”

“Bernardo,” the prince stopped him and shook his head quietly. “You already know.”

“What the hell…”

“I can’t wield my sword.”

He raised his hand and showed it to everyone—his torn, cracked, bloody palm.

“I can’t properly lift a sword with a hand like this.”

“No. No. Absolutely not. Look at my hands. My hands are as scarred as your Highness’s…”

“I can’t use mana, I don’t have power in my hands. It’s hard for me to walk right now.”

Hearing this confession, Bernardo Eli sat down on the floor while staring at the prince blankly.

“How… But how…” Eli gritted his teeth and forced his words out. “How are you so casual?”

The prince shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“Because this is not a punishment.”

He spoke with a gentle smile that made Eli want to scream.

“That’s because this is a gift she left me.”

His eyes looked at empty space as if he was chasing someone who was not there.

“It seems that I, who rushed on looking only forward, wanted to stop and rest like this. I guess I, who always knew of nothing but swords and war, wanted to forget about it all for a while and take a look around. So while reviving me, she didn’t fix my mana heart. Yes, she must have had that ability.”

Like when he had been in the garden the night before, talking to himself, the prince spoke slowly with a voice full of despair and longing.

“Maybe it’s what I wanted—to start anew. To not be tied up in the past anymore, to get a fresh chance. I noticed that Anne wanted me to do that too. At the end, Anne called me Ian, not-”

The prince suddenly looked at the knights.

“So I’m going to do that.”

And then, he laughed little.

“As they wanted me to.”

His was shameless laughter, that of the optimist who had lost everything yet saw more to live for still.

“I want to live like a person.”

He had a smile like that of an investigator who found the final answer after great suffering. At the same time, his expression was hopeful and anticipatory; it seemed to belong to a dreaming boy. His innocent face did not fit the situation, and the knights were lost for words. Their faces clearly showed that they did not understand what the hell the prince was talking about. That was, for one of them: Arwen Kirgayen.

“Good idea,” Arwen told the Crown Prince as she stepped forward while the other knights remained blank. Her eyes conveyed the truth of her words and her bold look

was remarkable. There was even a subtle smile on her lips. As for the other knights, her expression was as incomprehensible to them as the prince's attitude.

"I thought if it's Arwen, she would have said that."

The prince merely spoke in a daze, as if he had known from the beginning that Arwen would come out for him.

"I'll be your Highness's sword."

It was then that Adelia Bavaria approached the prince, looking tragic yet noble in the eyes of the others.

"Because I swore that from the beginning."

The Crown Prince stretched his eyes wide, then let them curl as he laughed.

"It's reassuring."

That was the beginning of everything.

"What if there is no sword left? Thousands of swords and spears in the north await your Highness's orders," Vincent Balahard growled, saying that if anyone blocked the prince's path, they would be buried away from his eyes right away.

"Before, on that day, your Highness told me to be a shield. I will be that shield," Carls Ulrich said, expressing his determination to be faithful in his role as palace knight.

And Bernardo Eli- 'Bwak' -opened the door and ran out of the room.

"He's…" Vincent tried to explain the immature act, "He's the only one whose seen only your Highness's back since winter. It's probably hard for him to accept the current situation."

Arwen Kirgayen stepped up to appease the others' dissatisfaction, mentioning how, since Bernardo Eli was knighted, he had wanted to emulate the Crown Prince.

Vincent clucked his tongue and asked the Crown Prince a question as if suddenly remembering something.

“So what are you going to do from now on?”

“I don’t have any special plans yet,” the prince said with a bright laugh. “For once, I’m going to sit around and think about it.”

**

“Give me the knife.”

Vincent frowned.

“You said you’re thinking, relaxing.”

“Yeah, I’ve been idle,” the prince said proudly as if this was some great achievement.

“By the way, is this preparation for holding a sword?”

“Uh…”

“What do you want to use the knife for? You can’t even hold it properly.”

“I said it’s okay, so why don’t you just come out and say what you want to say?”

“So- Are you upset?”

“I’m not. I don’t change my attitude so quickly.”

“Yes, because you don’t have a spontaneous personality, right?”

“I don’t, really.”

For a few moments, the duke and prince aimlessly conversed.

“So why do you need a knife that you can’t even hold properly?” Vincent asked again, squinting his eyes.

“I can hold a small knife,” the prince growled.

“Are you trying to learn using daggers?”

“No.”

“Why then?”

“I want to make something.”

Vincent frowned at such an unexpected answer.

“What?”

“I don’t know so far. Please just give me the knife.”

“I want to know what purpose the knife will serve, understand?”

“I’m going to carve some wood.”

Yet another unexpected answer made Vincent narrow his eyes as he looked at the prince.

“So, will you help me, or not?” the Crown Prince roughly asked.

“You need some lumber?”

**

“What is this?” The prince laughed when he saw the timber piled up on one side of the dojo. “When I asked for some wood, I didn’t ask you to clear a whole forest.”

Rather than wood for carving, the enormous amount of lumber would be enough to build a house, and even then, logs would remain. Moreover, it wasn’t just wood that Vincent had sent.

“Why are you here again?”

The ranger standing in front of the timber pile laughed. “Your Highness wants to make something out of wood?”

“That’s right.”

“The most important thing in carving wood is dexterity! And when it comes to

dexterity, it's Jordan who's the master! I am the best carpenter in Balahard!"

The prince laughed as he heard the lengthy answer.

"Balahard's best drinker, Balahard's best ranger, Balahard's best curser. And this time, Balahard's best carpenter?"

"Excluding the swearing, and adding the word handsome in its place: that's me," Jordan deftly replied, even in the face of the prince's challenge. Then he started talking for some time about his versatility.

"Do you know how useful I am now?"

"I don't know that. I know that you are skipping work, though."

Jordan, who had constantly spoken, shut his mouth for the first time. However, being chatty by nature, he quickly opened his mouth again.

"So what are you trying to make? Jewelry? Statues? Furniture? A weapon?"

"What I want to make-"

"Name anything. The best carpenter in Balahard will make your Highness a great woodworker in no time through my experience and know-how."

"So I-"

"If you have a woman in mind, why don't you try making ornaments for her? When it comes to wooden jewelry, there are some people who think of cheap things that are usually sold at market stalls, and that's the prejudice of those who know only of the lesser arts! How graceful wood can be- Once you see it done right, you'll never think of the cheap stuff again!"

The Crown Prince opened and closed his mouth several times, then stumbled. The ranger's intense chatter was making his head dizzy.

'Shh!'

Adelia, who had silently stepped forward to support the prince's body, frowned. Jordan, after yelling, bit his lip.

“So what are you going to make?” he asked carefully after a while, attentively looking at Adelia.

It was then, with a dazed face, that the Crown Prince answered the ranger.

“A statue.”

“There are many kinds of carvings. Wood varies widely depending on what size, what shape, and what grain is used-”

“Adelia.”

Just when Jordan was about to unleash his torrent of words again, the Crown Prince softly spoke up.

“Cut it apart.”

“How should I cut it?”

“From that size into eight pieces.”

The ranger’s expression paled to white, for it sounded as if the Crown Prince was thinking about cutting him into pieces.

“Well- Wait a minute-”

Before Jordan finished speaking, Adelia’s sword aura flashed.

“Ugh!” The ranger screamed, hastily groping his body.

‘Hwak!’

Then he looked right behind him. Of the wood that had been piled up, one log with an appropriately pleasing color was rolling over the floor, cut into eight sections.

‘Strit!’ Adelia Bavaria glanced at the ranger as she passed him by.

‘Chuck’

Then she picked up a log and gave it to the prince.

“It’s just right.”

A satisfied smile came to the prince’s face as he studied the wooden segment.

“Come with me. Give me that knife over there.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

After this short exchange, the prince turned around and headed toward his palace.

“I feel relieved to see that my body is still intact, but not so much that his personality is still the same.”

The ranger, once he was alone, gave a sigh of relief as he stared in the direction they had left in. But his relief proved short-lived.

“Ah! My chance is ruined! Now I must either go on a long-distance patrol or run away!” the ranger screamed, becoming filled with angst as he considered he might be put back to work.

**

From that day on, the Crown Prince spent all day carving wood.

Even when his guests came, he did not take his carving knife from his hand. His entire time, except for when he slept, he devoted to carving. However, he realized that it wasn’t easy to sculpt with his broken hands, and the results of his labors were not yet significant.

“It seemed easy when Anne was doing it. It’s harder than I thought,” he grumbled as he looked down at the state of his carving.

Adelia Bavaria suddenly stared at the Crown Prince.

“What?”

“Sometimes… I’m curious about who this Anne person is whom your Highness talks about.”

“There is such a person,” the prince replied as he grabbed the chunk of wood he had

laid down for a while. He again began forcing his stunted hands to mold the wood.

“She’s rough of mouth and warm of heart. She isn’t large, but her swordplay is amazing.”

Adelia could not see the Crown Prince’s face, bowed over his work as he was.

“She told me to live instead of sacrificing my life for others. She told me to live as the human Adrian Leonberger, not as a knight.”

Yet, it wasn’t difficult for Adelia to guess what expression the prince held on his face.

“She told me to live more confidently than anyone else.”

Adelia didn’t know, but the prince was probably smiling.

“She is such a wonderful woman.”

His voice was also very warm.

CHAPTER 273
ADRIAN LEONBERGER (1)

The royal palace was peaceful.

The nobles who had gathered to attend the funeral heard that it had been canceled and made a fuss for a while, but such disturbances only occurred outside the palace. Deep within the royal palace, where the royal family lived, it was extremely quiet. The east wing of the palace, now called the Crown Prince's Palace, was the most silent section of all.

It was by virtue of the king's command that everyone refrained from doing anything that might hinder the master of this wing from taking a break. Of course, even if there had been no royal decree, no one who was wise would make a fuss so deep inside the palace. If there was someone who would cause chaos, it could only be Adrian Leonberger. However, he was now extremely ill and in the process of recuperation, and was not in the same condition as before the accident.

He seldom left his room, gripping his carving knife all day and trimming wood. Thanks to this, the royal palace was in an unprecedented state of peace.

At least on the outside, it seemed this way.

"She was the first to hear that there is such a woman."

The only duke in the kingdom sat hunched on his stool within the palace courtyard.

"What kind of woman is she, to be so friendly with the Crown Prince?" The old marquis who sat facing him muttered.

"I don't know. But what's certain is that his Highness has a face I've never seen before whenever he talks of the woman named Anne," a light-brown-haired woman, her eyes cast down, explained to the two men.

"What exactly does she look like?" the marshal asked, and the woman became locked within her thoughts for a moment.

Then Bielefeld asked, “Are her eyes misty and her face red-hot, with a smile as sweet as candy that tugs at her mouth? Or has she a stern look and dull eyes, with a smile as bitter as gall? Can you build us a picture?”

They urged her to continue, noticing that she had become submerged in her thoughts for a while.

“I don’t know what kind of face the marquis is talking about.”

Feeling sorry for not being able to answer Bielefeld’s hearty question, the woman further lowered her eyes.

“So, to put it plainly, I’m asking if she has a lovely girlish face, or if her face is that of a broken-hearted hag?”

However, not knowing how the woman looked like, Adelia kept stammering in the face of the old man’s questions.

“I mean, how can you guess a person’s mind by looking at their expressions?” the young duke spoke up. “Oh, marquis, stop fidgeting and stay quiet.”

“No, I don’t know how. But it’s perfectly normal to try,” the marquis complained.

“We can no longer try to see without knowing anything,” the duke responded, and said to the woman, “Have you heard anything else, like Anne’s last name… or anything like that?”

“His highness just calls her Anne,” the woman replied in embarrassment, and the marquis once more interjected himself into the conversation.

“The nobles hate short names. Maybe her name, Anne, isn’t her real name either.”

“You know, think more about that, because no one knows that name,” the duke replied after hearing the marquis suggest that Anne might be someone’s nickname.

“Joanna is Anne, Angela is also Anne. Anna is Anne. Anne should be one of those, at least.”

“After you’re done with that, why don’t you start looking around his Highness the Crown Prince’s palace? I’ll start by seeing if there are any maids or court ladies who

had a relationship with his Highness who use the nickname Anne."

The young duke silently stroked his chin as he fell deep into thought. "Anne… It's Anne… I'll have to look into it."

"I'll help," the old marshal said as if having waited for the chance.

"Then, marquis, you will take care of the young lady side of matters. I'll take care of the investigation in the north. It's an area without so many women, so if I inquire among some of the unmarried rangers, I might get lucky."

"Well, young duke, if we search the noble register, the answer will come out soon."

"Then, on the matter of the maids…"

"For the maids, Prime Minister Kirgayen is also a servant of the court, so he can ask them."

The duke and the marquis continued to arrange the roles each would play.

"We can't rule out the possibility of a past relationship. His Highness also attended a social club, so we'll have to find out about that."

"My intelligence network does not stretch that far."

"I know Bernardo Eli had the place running in full swing."

"If we ask Sir Eli, the information will quickly come out."

The woman who silently watched them speak turned to leave, and the marquis and duke continued to exchange opinions without noticing that she was going.

"I'll see you here again in the evening."

"Okay, see you later."

Then, with sincere faces, both men wished each other good luck and left the Crown Prince's Palace. The duke, immediately after standing up, sought out his men.

"If you know someone who uses the nickname Anne, bring them to me."

Upon the duke's instructions, the knights gathered rangers, who did not know what was going on, and set about to locate a character named Anne. As a result, by the time the sun had set, some rangers already stood before the duke.

"Do you know the name Anne?"

"There is a village two days from our castle, and there is an Anak who lives there."

"Details."

"She's an amazing baker, but she has a shady and long past."

"Shady? How old is she?"

"I don't know the exact age, but I know that her youngest son became a ranger and fell-"

"She's a married woman. She's off the list. Next?"

"Ann is the daughter of John the Wagoner who travels to and from the castle."

"Ho… Does John have a daughter? How old is she?"

"Last year, she turned eleven…"

"All right. Next."

After a long time, only one ranger was left in front of the duke.

"You're a member of Jordan's company?"

"Yes, I am!"

"So, ranger- What kind of Anne is the Anne you know?"

The ranger shrank bank a bit as he noticed the duke's glare, then spoke.

"That's me."

"What?"

“My name is Anadrian, and everyone abbreviates it to Anne because it’s long and too similar to his Highness’s name.”

At this, the duke simply sighed.

“Let’s go back and rest. Ranger Ann stays behind and does twenty laps around the parade grounds.”

“Yes? Why all of a sudden-” the ranger attempted to complain at the unfairness of it.

“If you don’t know, your body deserves to suffer,” the duke interrupted, gesturing with his hand and driving them all away.

“We sent out a company commander—he didn’t notice anything.”

The duke, still grumbling softly, asked the knights about the northern women. But, as expected, the Anne he was looking for was not found.

“I hope the marquis has had better success.”

Night came, and duke and marquis both headed to the Crown Prince’s Palace.

“No. Maids and court ladies, none match the conditions.”

“On my side too.”

“Did you look into the social club side of things?”

“We have to go through Bernardo Eli, but I haven’t seen him these past few days…”

“No? His Majesty will be disappointed by this.

“Did the story even reach his Majesty?”

“It is just a story, but he is very interested.”

The duke sighed as he learned the marshal had also achieved no gains, when the marquis suddenly exclaimed, “What do we do now!”

“Well… Count Kirgayen once mentioned the name Anne.”

“Perhaps…”

“Yes. The count surely once called his eldest daughter Anne.”

“Certainly, Arwen’s nickname can be Anne.”

In the middle of their conversation, the subject of it appeared at the palace.

“Sir Arwen, why is your nickname Anne?”

The knight’s face grew cold as they asked her such a blunt question.

“I’ve never had such a name.”

“No, Sir Arwen, your father-”

“Doesn’t use things like nicknames,” she bit back at their stubborn persistence.

Then they became like clay in Arwen’s hands, explaining the circumstances to her, and asking for her opinion.

“Why don’t you ask my master directly?”

Hearing her words, the two men looked at each other, thinking the same thing.

“Because it may be rude to ask the person concerned about this problem,” one of them stated an excuse, but this argument did not work for the female knight.

“It is far ruder to investigate the matter behind the back of the concerned party. Please follow me,” Arwen curtly said and turned around. She led them straight to the prince’s residence.

“You’re here?”

The prince, sitting on his bed and stroking the wood carving, greeted them with a welcoming face. Arwen stared at the prince’s hand, and he followed her gaze, lowering his head as he too looked at his hand with an awkward face.

Then he hid his fingers, bandaged after cuts from the carving knife, under a fold in his clothes.

“But why are you here? At this late an hour?”

His expression showed clearly that he had no intention of discussing his hand, and that he was willing to change the topic by force. But instead of focusing on it, Arwen answered with simple sincerity.

“I came to the palace because these men have a personal matter to discuss with your Highness, and I stopped by to greet you on the way to my retreat. I hope I did not interfere with your rest.”

“They want to tell me something?”

“It’s not something your Highness will care about.”

The prince was now curious as to what conspiracy he was being excluded from.

“Then, Vincent, marquis, what do you have to say?” he asked the two men who stood behind Arwen. His piercing gaze flew like arrows to them, and the duke and marquis both could give no answer.

“You have something to ask,” Arwen urged them, taking in their pathetic appearance.

“Are you going to ask me? What?”

“They have something to ask about a person named Anne,” Arwen again answered on behalf of the two men.

“Ah, Ann. But why wonder about Ann? What are you curious about?”

Here, Arwen shrugged her shoulders and stepped back.

The marquis, after hesitating for a long time, stepped forward and asked the Crown Prince, “Where is the woman named Anne?”

“Anne is dead,” the Crown Prince replied with a clear face.

The two men froze as they were.

“Sorry, sorry.”

After standing rigid for a long time, they bowed their heads respectfully as they apologized to the prince. Even Arwen, who tended to remain consistently expressionless, couldn't hide her embarrassment this time.

"Vincent, marquis, it wasn't you who killed her, so why are you sorry?"

Regardless of how they felt, the Crown Prince laughed brightly.

In the midst of such an awkward atmosphere, Arwen cleared her throat, then asked the prince about the piece of wood he clutched.

"But what are you making?"

"This?"

The prince quickly lifted his work for display with a proud face.

"It's finally coming to an end. If you wait a bit, you'll see it."

It was unbelievable that a wooden statuette that looked so rough was near completion, yet they could not state so in the face of the prince's heartiness, for he seemed very anxious to show it off for some reason.

"I was just curious, but I will wait," Arwen replied.

"Okay, it will be well worth it."

The prince, with a rather excited face, immediately grabbed his carving knife and began to cut into the piece of wood. The duke and marquis also sat down and began watching the prince carve away. The expressions of the onlookers heavily sank as they heard the prince grunt as he clumsily shaved off slivers of wood. His power of crushing an enemy within his armor, his finesses of aiming a blade through the right gap, was nowhere to be seen. To those who remembered the best knight in the north, it was hard to bear through his fumbling and strained hand movements, for he worked like a child who struggled to grab something big with his hands.

But they didn't turn away from the sight; they just watched.

"All done!"

And finally, the prince completed the sculpture.

The result was of a messy shape with a rough surface, and the proportions were unbalanced and crude. Still, the Crown Prince showed it to them with a proud face as if he liked the crude statuette very much.

“This is the sword, this is the armor. This is the hair.”

If it were not for his subsequent explanation, they would never have recognized the carving to be that of a person. And they certainly could not give voice to critical comments while the prince proudly showed off his work.

“It is a statue that exudes a manly spirit,” the duke said with excitement.

“This is a woman.”

Vincent shut his mouth.

“She has a truly brave appearance, what with her holding her enemy’s head in hand,” Bielefeld attempted a compliment.

“This is not an enemy’s head, it’s a helmet. Look here: It has a crest and eye slits.”

The marquis now also turned his head away with an embarrassed expression.

“It’s full of vitality,” Arwen, watching, offered her dubious review.

“I also gave her your eyes, Arwen. This was made with people I know in mind.”

The prince’s face, which looked somewhat pensive, opened up again. Seeing his wide smile, the duke and marquis, still embarrassed by their recent errors, also grinned and happily looked at the statuette. But this newfound warmth did not last long.

“This is Anne.”

The air in the room froze again.

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Those who had visited the prince’s palace left, and only Adelia Bavaria remained,

clutching the crude carving of a woman as she guarded the sleeping prince. As the night went on, Adelia, sitting with her back upright, stood. She then quietly headed to the door.

'Shh.'

As she silently opened the door, she saw a man with a backpack carried over his cloak, as if he was about to undertake a journey of some distance.

"Bernardo Eli."

Adelia had been aware of Eli's presence from the moment he entered the palace, and she looked at him with a sad expression.

"Don't look at me with such a face. I know what you're thinking: if this man was honest, he would come when the prince was awake and not like a thief while he slept. I know I'm a bastard."

Eli spoke in a lowered voice so as to not wake up the Crown Prince and Adelia, instead of answering him, silently gave way. Still, Bernardo Eli could not readily enter the room. This remained unchanged no matter how many times Adelia meaningfully glanced at him. He simply stood outside the door and stared at the sleeping prince. Then, after a while, he sighed and started complaining.

"Now I can't even bear to see his Highness's face. In fact, it's his Highness who has greater heartache than anyone—I shouldn't be so emotional."

Adelia opened her mouth, but then snapped it shut because she thought Eli would not be comforted by her words. So, instead, she asked him, "Are you going anywhere far away?"

"I'm thinking of going to the southern front."

"What happened on the southern front?"

"The commander of the Southern Army has requested the deployment of a champion in preparation for border defense."

"Okay, Sir Eli. When his Highness asks for you, I will tell him that."

“Thank you.”

Bernardo Eli bowed his head in quite a modest manner.

“Please protect him.”

Then he turned around and departed.

“Sah,” with a small sigh, Adelia quietly shut the door and turned around. She suddenly noticed that the Crown Prince had shifted to her side of the bed. His breath, which had been quite regular until a while ago, was somewhat disturbed. He did not seem to be in a natural sleeping state, what with his eyelids flickering fractionally open from time to time.

Adelia Bavaria grinned.

“Eli?” the prince grumbled and opened his eyes.

“Can he leave like that?”

“Ah, I don’t know. If he goes, should I press the matter?” the prince muttered in dissatisfaction, and his gaze suddenly turned to the door where Eli had stood moments before.

“It looks like your Highness is worried. If you’re so worried, just call him back.”

“No. If I keep him close… I shouldn’t because he always tries to follow after me. If he stays beneath the branches of a great tree because it offers shelter from the rain and wind, he will never receive proper sunlight, even if he is satisfied with his refuge.”

Adelia knew how badly Sir Eli wanted to reclaim his old legacy, and the prince’s voice was quite severe as he touched upon this. However, the lingering emotion around his eyes was more a sign of anxiety than harshness, and Adelia laughed. As she did, the Crown Prince closed his eyes and buried himself beneath the blanket.

“Tell Count Brandenburg my message…”

After a while, his dazed voice sounded through the blanket.

“What should I say?”

“I heard that among the mercenaries gathered at the extermination headquarters, there were about three hundred with steel bones who didn’t flee even during the rampage. Tell the count to send them to the southern front… Under the command of6 that guy Eli.”

These were the mercenaries who had persevered through the uproar and remained at the fort, and if they were taught well, they could become very good knights.

“If a man has three hundred knights, even his ruined family can rise again…”

Adelia laughed again she heard the voice murmuring from under the blanket.

CHAPTER 274
ADRIAN LEONBERGER (2)

Adrian Leonberger was a hero. Not an episode in his saga was not heroic, and none of his achievements lacked splendor. However, where he was so brilliant now, his past wasn't. Rather, it was an ugly era heaped with deserved criticism from many people. Due to his inherently violent nature, it was common for many average persons to have faced his ire, and there were many cases of insults or harm done to those who came to him in good faith.

It was natural for countless numbers of those who harbored grudges against him to exist. They never believed the rumors concerning Adrian Leonberger.

The hero, the savior of the country that people spoke of had been regarded as propaganda created by the royal family to calm the populace in times of confusion. People expected that as the world calmed down again, that ugly face of the prince would be revealed to the world.

And at that time, they didn't doubt that the tower of lies that had been built would collapse and that Adrian's notoriety would resonate under all the heavens. However, no matter how much time passed, what they expected did not happen at all. Rather, as the years passed by, Adrian Leonberger's reputation only continued to grow. In all the population centers, people started to actively witness Prince Adrian's devotion and heroic deeds. By that point, they could no longer regard the rumors as vainglorious fabrications.

They, too, had to admit: Adrian Leonberger, whom they had hated so much, had indeed changed. The irredeemable hedonist no longer existed in this world; all that remained was a devoted knight who had overcome the errors of his childhood to grow into a hero riding to Leonberg's rescue. When they realized this, the feeling of being broken overcame them.

Their bodies had been left with horrible scars, and the spite and hatred in their hearts still ran deep, but it was directed to the stupid prince who existed only in the past. The terrible things they had suffered were simply regarded as mistakes made by an inexperienced child, and others began to criticize their wailing screams as the

insults of narrow-minded, blasphemous folk; they were censured by their own kind.

Thus, they became lost, having been stripped of the last channel down which they could pour their ire and indignation.

It was during this time that people dispatched by the royal family came to them. Through them was heard that Adrian Leonberger was repenting for his past transgressions and that he was taking the time to atone to his victims.

“When this confusing situation is settled, come to the royal palace. His Highness said that that he would always welcome you with open arms.”

With this short statement, the messengers left—leaving a sack of money, so much that a commoner could never hope to see such an amount in their lifetimes. There was even a silver plaque specially made for them. Yet, they could not spend this money even in times of need, not because it was dirty, but because if they did, Adrian Leonberger’s evil deeds would be erased from the world forever. The plaques naming them as royal guests were not used either, for they were afraid that if they met Adrian Leonberger again, he would be exactly as the world said he was.

Time passed, and one day they received news which they believed was good.

“His Highness the Crown Prince is dead.”

They heard the obituary of Adrian Leonberger, whom they hated so much. And so sublime was his death that even the hatred they had been holding onto for ten years passed. It was said that the prince, while facing a mighty enemy that even the champions could not face, burned away his life by plunging a royal sword into his chest. And in so doing, he removed the dark clouds that had settled over the kingdom. It was said that if the prince had wanted to live, he could have done so, yet he gave his life for a greater cause.

When the victims heard this heroic story, their hatred lost its direction, and their wounds were forever healed.

They headed for the royal road like crazed people, holding the plaques that the royal messengers had given them.

The gatekeeper of the royal palace opened the gates for them without a word, as if he had known who they were from the moment he saw them—and they were guided

directly to the prince's palace.

"His Highness has long been waiting for you to come. It's too late."

A palace knight in broken armor showed them the way with a grieving face. And finally, they were able to meet the person they came to meet, who they never wanted to meet. In front of a cooling corpse, they were forced to swallow back the words on the tips of their tongues reserved for an enemy. The one they had hated so much was a greedy lecher with a greasy, overlarge body, not a wounded saint who was ravaged at the end of his long, ascetic path.

They looked at Adrian Leonberger's deadened form, their emotions all having become vain.

There was no spot without scars or cuts on the bare flesh exposed under the pure white shroud. None of the welting scars were shallower than those left on their own bodies. Blankly looking at the wounds, they became locked in their thoughts.

They had heard that the prince had fought and struggled on battlefields when he couldn't even properly hold his sword. They hadn't believed even half of such stories; now they had to believe them all. The scars all over his corpse proved the roughness of the road that Prince Adrian had walked. Born as a noble into the royal family, he could have enjoyed all kinds of pleasures—so why had Adrian Leonberger fought on instead of safely fleeing from the harsh battlefield?

Perhaps he had wanted to repent for his own mistakes, living so fiercely that he came to pay the ultimate price. If it was so… then the scars crisscrossing his body were indeed traces of a punishment that they themselves had inflicted upon him.

They came to believe that he had already paid the price, so much so that his repentance was greater than an overflowing lake in thaw.

"Ten years ago, there was a big incident."

Those who stared at Adrian Leonberger's corpse as if fascinated by it snapped awake.

"I foolishly thought that the incident was caused by this child, and I just resented and hated him. In fact, from the start, my son had not committed this sin… from the very start."

There stood the king—they did not know when he had entered; perhaps he had been there from the beginning.

“It must have been unbearable for a child of twelve to face such hatred and resentment when all he needed was the warmth of his parents. The evils committed upon you by this child were caused by my hatred. The true apology you deserve is not from my son—neither is the fault yours, but mine.”

They just stared blankly on as they heard the king’s apology.

“Of course, I know that this does not mean that my son’s sins will disappear. So, I’m going to ask you, beg you…”

The king was asking them as a father, not as monarch of the country.

“Don’t blame this child too much. Just blame and curse his ugly father.”

They could give no answer to the king’s request. They merely looked at Adria Leonberger’s corpse, helpless.

‘Cheolkup!’

Just then, the door opened. And, from beyond the aperture, a man promptly appeared.

“Greetings, your Majesty.”

He had a terrible-looking face, almost as if he was a man deaf to the world.

“You- What do have to say now?”

At this, the king closed his eyes tightly.

“This case of ten years ago… Is it the case I know? Is it really the case I know!” the man yelled before the king. “We knights of the abandoned fortress, we three hundred and twenty-three. Are you correctly speaking about the day when we ourselves broke our rings?”

The king did not rebuke the man for his rudeness; he merely opened his eyes and nodded his head in silence.

The man's face became distorted.

"Don't… It's ridiculous…"

"There was another person who informed them of your existence. My child was just caught up in the wicked tricks of adults."

Then, through the king's mouth, details of the disaster of a decade ago flowed out.

"Well, did your Majesty know about it?"

Facing such truth, the man looked even more tired, paler.

"It is my son who first revealed the truth of the incident—no one knew."

"No! I can't believe it!"

"The informant himself confessed and confirmed the fact several times through Montpellier. There is no lie to my words."

The man was shaken to his core, as if he had done something unclean.

"It can't be that way. His Highness himself admitted it. He admitted his mistake and told us to increase our strength so that we could directly punish him for his sins."

"My son said that?" the king sighed. "It seems that Balahard's blood ran thicker than Leonberger's within him. So, I'm sure that's why he stuck to such a difficult and destructive path, like his uncle and… like his mother."

The king looked at the ceiling for a moment, then looked at the man again. The man, facing his monarch with eyes deep with sorrow, shouted as if having a seizure.

"Why! If that's true! If that's true! Why didn't your Majesty reveal the truth!"

"He didn't want me to. He said that you need a motive to once more sharpen your swords. He wanted you to stand up firmly, to keep such hatred and resentment. It was the best for you and even for the kingdom—he believed this."

These words made the man stumble.

**

His world had been overturned countless times, and in the end, it collapsed. After that, even as news came and went, his memories gradually became vague.

When he woke up, he was already drunk and slumming it in the alleys of the royal capital.

“If you want to hide, why don’t you hide until the very end…?”

As he sat against the wall, his speech rambled on like a madman’s. Then he suddenly contorted his face into a demonic expression.

“Ggwaain, Gwain—Are you trying to escape reality by blaming someone else? You are really rotten and corrupted.”

The past played itself out in his head. He spat out harsh curses at the deceased prince, and expressed no gratitude for anything the Crown Prince had ever given him… even if, with his full support, Gwain had reached the highest level of Sword Expert… yet still… Gwain had been consistently ignored, even when he had gained such mastery of the martial arts!

At that time, he thought such aid was the price the Crown Prince had to pay—that he deserved to suffer no matter the cost.

In fact, none of those sins were originally his!

Gwain was swearing, and the quality of his vocabulary was perverse.

“Wow!”

He couldn’t help but feel upset.

However, no matter how well he knew that he had been deceived, feelings of self-loathing and disgust entered his body in a torrent of filth that did not abate at all. It was as if it was a decade ago; as if Gwain had returned to those terrible times. It had been better then…

During those years, he had someone else to resent and hate; now, there was only himself.

Gwain struggled with his feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and self-hatred—and he was desperate, so frustrated because there was no way to rectify his wrongdoing; there was no longer anyone to apologize to.

So, he drowned himself in drinks as he traveled through the capital's alleys. Then, he suddenly heard an incredible outcry.

"The Crown Prince has risen!"

At first, he thought he was hearing bullshit because his drunken mind was confused.

"His Highness is alive!"

However, the shouts he thought he misheard resounded against the walls several times, and the stinky back alleys and shady corners were filled with joy wherever he stumbled. Gwain told himself it was absurd; he had personally confirmed several times that the prince had stopped breathing. So, he slinked back into his alley.

A few days later, Gwain entered a bar to get more liquor and chanced to notice drunk people raising their glasses high.

"Congratulations on the return of his Highness the Crown Prince!"

"Leonberger family, live forever!"

There were too many people yelling for Gwain to consider the statement false; the faces of the celebrants were too bright.

So, he headed for the palace—and he met the prince.

The Crown Prince was alive, and though he was not a cold corpse with closed eyes, he was far from his former energetic appearance, being a haggard figure that reclined on his bed with a pale face.

'Shh'

As if possessed, Gwain approached the Crown Prince. Duke Balahard and the prince's knights stood before him.

"Okay," the prince snapped at his knights.

“Your Highness’s body is uncomfortable. Even if it is a small act, I will not permit anything that might disturb your health,” Duke Balahard warned in a cold, almost frozen voice.

“Let go of me. Stop this fuss and go out.”

“Your Highness, know that I am a man with an uncomfortable heart when it comes to your Highness’s wellbeing. Please tell me if I overstep my position.”

“It’s okay. Just go out.”

“In case-”

“I said it’s really okay.”

“Then I’ll be outside the door, so if anything happens, send me a message right away.”

“I’m not a child. Adelia is also next to me, so what is there to worry about? Stop nagging and get out.”

Duke Balahard begged the prince a few more times before stepping back.

“Don’t be foolish,” he said. “If you do anything useless—in the first place, I’ll bet you’ll regret being reborn.”

When the knights and the duke left, with the latter leaving such a sharp warning, Gwain Gust came to stand in front of the prince. His gaze moved over the prince, stopping on his hand, which held a carving knife. The hand trembled as if gripping something heavy, yet it was definitely a small and light carving knife that could not be compared to the sword the prince had used to handle.

“My hands are completely stunted. My mana heart is completely broken.”

When the prince said this, Gwain stiffened.

“But I believe it is good to start over—I see the profit in it. Is it not so?” the prince asked with a laugh when he saw Gwain harden like a stone statue. Gwain was dazed by such words, his head was a mess. He struggled to understand what he had heard. Now he couldn’t even remember what he had been thinking of when coming here.

So he stood up and looked at the prince, then asked him in a constricted voice, “Why did you do it?”

“What?” The prince asked with a clear expression.

“Why did you shoulder sins you did not commit?”

“Ah…” The prince’s smiling face hardened.

“You thought I would be grateful if you did that! You thought it beneficial for me to sharpen and polish my sword using such hate! You thought I would shed tears because of your noble sacrifice!”

Gwain tried to stop, but his mouth was out of control; it moved with a will of its own.

“What did you think was going to happen! What the hell are you doing now! A man who lived for the good of the realm! How can you be lying in bed like a sick chicken?”

‘Schoop!’

The woman guarding the prince approached in a blur, drawing her sword and aiming it at Gwain’s neck. She spoke in warning, saying that if he raised his voice again, she would slit his jugular.

“I ask myself if I’m feeling relieved! I should be relieved! I would die, now! At that time you mocked us and rebuked us for weakness! I will do it too!”

‘Bwak!’ The door slammed open, and knights poured into the room.

“Don’t be weak, you said! Unscrupulous bastard! So your mana heart is broken? It’s your duty to build up your mana again!”

Regardless of the blade aiming at his throat, Gwain kept shouting.

“Start over! If your heart is broken, make a ring!”

Grim-faced knights drew their swords and approached, yet Gwain did not stop his mouth from moving.

“Why, you talked so easily before, but you can’t do it now? It wasn’t your hurt, back

then—is that why you talked so easily?"

The woman's eyes had been gleaming with horror as she held her blade at the ready. Now, all emotion disappeared from her.

'Dwak!'

A crushing shock of energy battered into Gwain, making his knees buckle.

'Quazzik!'

At the same time, the cold kiss of metal touched his neck.

"Who are you to dare say such things…"

The woman's voice, dripping with cold malice, reached Gwain's ears. The blade pierced flesh, and a trickle of blood ran down Gwain's neck.

"Stop."

It was then that the prince spoke. The woman met Gwain's eyes, then withdrew her sword and stepped back.

"Adelia, why are you so violent?"

"Anyone who commits the sin of mocking their lord definitely deserves death."

"All the Rangers have to die, then."

"If your Highness wishes-"

"Are you crazy? Why are you so brutal? Killing is not all your life. I like the Adelia who loves life—my heart is aching."

"Wow, is Your Highness all right?!"

The woman ran into the Crown Prince's embrace, and it seemed as if she would cry right away.

"Your Highness, is everything well?" Duke Balahard asked, his face filled with more

concern than before.

“I’m okay now. But if everyone continues to scream like this, then I don’t think I’ll get better.”

Hearing this, Vincent and the other knights all shut their mouths.

“I’ll live in peace now.”

Only then did the Crown Prince’s face become one of satisfaction.

“Hmm.”

His gaze turned to Gwain Gust, who was kneeling.

“Well, I forgive you for not hearing the latest news. It’s not important.”

The prince’s tone was extremely calm.

“You’re starting over?” Gwain provocatively snapped at the prince. He wasn’t asking whether the prince was doing so, but rather if he was at all able. The prince laughed as he met that challenging gaze.

“You don’t have to be so childishly provocative,” he said, adding, “If you’re talking about a new beginning, I’ve been doing that since I woke up.”

Crown Prince Adrian had said that he had already started anew—all the while showing off his carving knives and crooked statues.

CHAPTER 275
ADRIAN LEONBERGER (3)

The knights looked at the prince, seeing that he had an ambiguous expression: neither smiling nor frowning. His hopeful words sounded good, but the knights' faces showed that they did not know why he had, out of nowhere, gestured at his statues.

"Now you know?" the Crown Prince asked them in a whimsical manner.

What the hell? The question that appeared on the knights' faces was the same; they were all in the same boat.

"Ah!" Carls Ulrich then exclaimed.

"Perhaps-"

He was about to say more when-

'Chin!'

Someone grabbed his shoulder. It was Arwen Kirgayen, who quietly shook her head. A question arose on Carls's face.

"Sure. I see."

Instead of giving Carls a definite answer, Arwen instead spoke words of unknown import to the prince as she faced him.

The Crown Prince lowered his hand, and his face puffed out. But this expression lasted only for a while.

"Ha-am," the prince soon yawned with a tired face.

"It looks like this is more excitement than his Highness is used to," Adelia ordered the knights to depart as she stepped forward.

“How…”

Gwain frowned and tried to step forward, but as one, the other knights blocked him off with their backs.

“Then, your Highness, we’re going to step back.”

“Please rest in peace.”

The Crown Prince glanced at the knights with half-closed eyes and lay down on the bed. Then he fell asleep as if he had fainted. Adelia glanced at the knights, removing the carving knife and the statuette from the prince’s hands. The knights left the room with soft steps.

‘Shk!’

After the door was closed, Vincent Balahard looked at it with a cold face. Gwain, surrounded by knights, stood there.

“Gwain Gust.”

Hearing that frigid voice, Gwain could not stop his body from stiffening.

“How long do I have to bear your arrogance?”

“I-”

“The smell of alcohol reeks on you. How do you dare stand before his Highness like that?”

“I- I just…”

“What? Is your tongue hardened by the stench?”

Vincent’s kind face that he had shown before the Crown Prince was nowhere to be found. All that remained was the Winter Commander, whose gaze was as cold as ice.

“I’m just…”

In the face of such frosty energy and dignity, Gwain repeated the same words several

times.

“I hate you. I hate your face, which always seems to belong to the most unfortunate person in the world. I hate your stubbornness which you couldn’t change after all this time, and the way your blasphemous eyes look at his Highness!” Vincent shouted at Gwain.

“I know you hate me, duke.”

“Yes. No, that’s fortunate. But you don’t know why I truly hate you.”

Vincent’s expression became even colder.

“The reason I really hate you is because of that sloppy attitude.”

Such levels of hatred and contempt were contained within his eyes.

“What is your use? What right do you have to make his Highness be staggered so by his surroundings? You are not serving with loyalty, you are not following your lord with respect. You just crawl around his Highness, heartless, like a phantom. Am I right?”

Gwain merely chewed his lips, faced with words of blame as sharp as a blade.

“Duke of the North.”

Arwen, who had hung back, stepped out.

“That’s enough.”

Vincent kept Gwain in his icy gaze and then turned around.

“When we meet again, I will have no more mercy.”

With those words, Vincent strode across the hall and left. Gwain, staring blankly at the other side of the hall, hung his head.

“I didn’t know. I really didn’t know how… It’s just that-”

“Do not be mistaken.”

With a sigh, Gwain raised his head.

“I don’t want to hear any excuses,” Arwen, looking at him, said with an expressionless face. “I don’t think the Duke of the North is wrong.”

Gwain was a knight who had been under her command at least once, yet she looked at him indifferently, as if seeing a stranger.

“You need to be aware of your position.”

She did not once shout at him.

“If you can’t show the loyalty and respect that his Highness deserves, it wouldn’t be bad for you to change your affiliation. If you want, please tell his Majesty and let him reinstate the position originally given to you.”

Arwen didn’t even shoot cold glances Gwain’s way.

“Maybe that’s better for you and your comrades.”

She merely recommended it in a modest manner.

“Go back and tell your comrades—everything you’ve heard and seen. Consider it. How will you all behave in the future—make your position clear. Then come to me afterward.”

Facing words that sounded even sharper than Vincent’s, Gwain distorted his face into a grin. But in the end, he could say nothing and bowed his head. Gwain stood there for a long time, silently meditating, then suddenly turned around and left.

“But why did you interrupt me before?” Carls suddenly asked, remembering to as he stared at Gwain’s back.

“Weren’t you about to ask about his Highness’s hand?” Arwen asked, embarrassed.

“That’s right. I was about to ask if his Highness’s efforts to make carvings was part of his training to regain the sense he had lost in his hands.”

“So, I stopped you.”

Arwen grew silent for a while, then spoke again.

“He has lived fiercely for the past seven years, bearing a load not suitable for one of his age.”

Her gaze turned towards the door.

“I hope his Highness will no longer carry any burdens, but that is merely my desire and expectation.”

It was as if Arwen was looking through the door at the prince.

“But sooner or later, his Highness will have to bear a lot again.”

Her eyes deepened.

“No matter when that time comes, I just want him to stay away from reality’s fierceness for now. I want him to be calm.”

Arwen’s gaze was as hard as her nickname: Knight of Steel.

“I am prepared to do anything for this.”

**

A month had already passed since the crown prince started making statuettes. Surprisingly, the prince’s sculpting skills did not improve at all during that time. The crudeness of his work had changed little between the figure of Anne he had made a month ago and the unknown piece he had recently finished. At least, it seemed so to Adelia’s eyes.

However, the prince’s thoughts seemed different on the matter.

“Oh! This one turned out pretty well!”

The prince burst into admiration as he observed the statuette in his hand. It was an incomprehensible sentiment for Adelia, so she chose to keep her mouth closed. But her master did not leave her alone.

“Adelia. Look at this.”

She heard his excited voice. When she turned her head, she saw the Crown Prince looking at her while holding a warped figurine in his hand. His eyes were burdensome for her to meet, for they were filled with anticipation as if he was waiting for a compliment. Adelia couldn't help but lower her eyes. But unfortunately, the overwhelmed prince couldn't even notice the uncomfortable look that appeared on her face, and he started talking with excitement.

"Isn't it the best I've ever made?"

She laughed awkwardly, and still couldn't answer. Fortunately, the Crown Prince's interest did not last long.

"It will be done soon."

The prince again began to focus on his work, which was on the verge of completion. Adelia found it questionable that the chunk of wood before her nose, with its unclear form, truly was a work of perfection. She studied her master. Seeing the prince work away at his sculpture while humming made her feel so good, quickly improving her mood. Without knowing about it, a soft smile played upon Adelia's lips.

'Shk Shk'

The sound of wood being carved without a break was somehow peaceful. After being drowsy for a while, Adelia gave a natural yawn.

"All done!"

She was yawning with her mouth wide open.

"Oh! I made this one well."

The Crown Prince offered his work for her admiration, his face filled with satisfaction. Looking at him, Adelia could not laugh or cry. It was her greatest happiness to see the Crown Prince laugh and chatter with excitement, but she believed he would soon ask her for comments, and her head already hurt. If Adelia was honest, this behavior didn't suit her temper, as she had long ago grown used to the prince being grim. It was never clear to her what she should say in such a dilemma.

From the first, the other knights had disappeared like ghosts whenever the prince

completed a statuette so that they could avoid such an uncomfortable situation. Then, when production of a new figurine started, they appeared as if they had never been gone, coming to check up on the prince. It was the same today. Normally, there wasn't a single knight entering the room when the prince was on the threshold of completing his piece. Adelia waited anxiously for other knights to come.

"Adelia. How about this?"

But they did not come; the moment she had been dreading came first.

"Highness?

"How does it feel to you?"

"What- What kind of feeling are you talking about?"

"Don't you feel like it's brimming with avariciousness?"

"I hear your Highness, and it seems like that…"

Adelia almost started to cry once more as she was faced with the prince's repeated questions.

"What is that? This again?" It was the lord of Winter Castle who came to Adelia's rescue.

"Oh! Vincent! Welcome back. Look at this. It's the masterpiece of my life."

"A masterpiece? What is that?"

"Uh… a mercenary with dual swords who's got some money troubles. Don't you see it that way?"

"I don't know if he's holding two swords. I don't know if it's a person in the first place."

Hearing Vincent's words, the prince clucked his tongue.

"Is that so?"

He looked at Vincent as if he was a simpleton who knew nothing of art, which made the duke frown.

“No, you know what I think? It looks like goblin meat chewed on by orcs, let alone like a person.”

“Hah, it’s okay. That’s why I don’t discuss art with swordsmen.”

“If anyone sees that, they’ll think you can’t hold a knife.”

“I’m not a knife person. I can’t use knives.”

“…”

Vincent looked at the Crown Prince as if he was being absurd. It was clear that Vincent very much wanted to say something, but was awaiting the right time.

“Why? What?”

Of course, the prince didn’t care.

“All right, say it.”

“I don’t know if I will.”

“I’m not going to show you my art from now on, Vincent. I don’t know if I should show it anyway.”

“Either way is good.”

It was a childish conversation that one would never believe was taking place between the Crown Prince and Duke of a country, but it was nothing new to Adelia. It wasn’t as if the two of them had started arguing like this yesterday. Adelia laughed as she remembered the two of them bickering and arguing over who had the most kills to claim a banner.

As Adelia watched two men arguing, not acting like their ages and positions, the door opened.

“Well?”

Arwen Kirgayen entered and stiffened when she noticed the room's bustling atmosphere.

"You're good at it, Arwen!"

"If you are an impartial knight, you will be able to express your honest opinion in front of his Highness. We need your opinion."

When the prince and the duke saw her, they fell in love.

"Arwen, tell me what you see here," the prince asked.

"Do you know what this is?" urged Vincent.

Their questions popped out at the same time, and Arwen glanced at the statuette presented to her by the Crown Prince.

"Isn't it a guy with two swords?"

Arwen crossed her arms.

"Look! Arwen knows art at a glance!" the Crown Prince beamed with an elated face.

"Oh my god! It's ridiculous! How can you find out what it is if it looks like chewed goblin meat!" Vincent cried desperately. Arwen didn't raise a single eyebrow, despite the two men's excited reactions.

"Duke of the North, his Majesty is looking for you."

She merely spoke her message as if he had heard nothing.

"His Majesty?"

Vincent, still full of disappointment, looked at Arwen.

"Since he said he'd be waiting, it's better to go quickly."

Duke Balahard looked back at the Crown Prince.

"I'll… go at once."

The prince waved at Vincent with a happy face. Arwen watched as Vincent frowned at her while walking from the room, then she suddenly remembered something.

“The mercenaries and some knights from Brandenburg County arrived at the southern fortress and joined up with Bernardo Eli.”

“Why tell me that?

“I just thought you’d be curious.”

“I’m not curious.”

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh.”

Arwen Kirgayen stared at the prince, and he also faced her—with a casual look. But it lasted only a while. The Crown Prince spoke, now looking unpleased.

“Remind me not to eat or drink a lot. Drinking like a dog… that’s a bad habit. I speak more often, then. When I talk more, I make mistakes.”

“Okay. I’ll tell your Highness right away.”

Arwen, her face consistently blunt, bowed her head and tried to leave the room, but the prince suddenly stopped her.

“Let’s head out together.”

He began standing up from the bed. Adelia, guarding his side, immediately reached out her hand and helped the Crown Prince to rise. Arwen also supported him on one flank.

“Arwen, can you take some of those things?”

The prince glanced at the statues he had carved over the past month.

“What do you mean?” she asked as she strode to the figurines, coming to a stand before them.

“There- Everything.”

“Are you telling me to take all of them?”

“Uh-huh, all.”

Arwen asked for the reason with a glance.

“You’ll find out soon,” the Crown prince stated by way of explanation.

Arwen nodded once and gathered up the statuettes. Meanwhile, Adelia was helping the prince to prepare.

“The night breeze is cold.”

“But this fur is heavy.”

“You still have to wear it.”

Adelia, disregarding the prince’s murmurings, took the thickest fur cloak and draped it over his skinny shoulders.

“Are you done now?”

She laughed at his words which sounded as if he was seeking permission from her.

“Then let’s go out.”

The prince staggered when he headed toward the door, and fearing that the prince would fall, Adelia hurriedly grabbed one of his shoulders.

“Your Highness?”

As the door opened, Carls Ulrich, who had been standing with his back to it, opened his eyes round. Then, after seeing Arwen’s arms were filled to the brim with wooden statues, Carls hurried to share her burden.

“Go.”

The Crown Prince headed straight for the palace grounds.

“Pull out some of those logs, and pile them up here.”

Adelia, without a question, stacked the timbers as the prince asked for.

“Now, ignite.”

Carls got busy. He went to fetch a burning log from the palace knights’ meal fire and came to shove it in between the logs that Adelia had stacked. After waiting for a while, the embers spread to the other logs.

‘Trap Tkap’

The crackling sound of dry wood burning soon came as the pile caught on fire.

“It’s taking hold right away.”

The prince spoke words that sounded like sighs as he looked at the flames, then reached his hand out to Arwen.

“Give it.”

“Your Highness?”

Arwen, puzzled, handed a statue to the Crown Prince. The prince stared at it blankly for a while. Then, after some time, he carefully reached out his hand.

‘Tuk!’

He threw the figurine he had made through carving and cutting onto the flames. Those who saw his sudden action stretched their eyes wide.

“Your Highness?”

“Give me another one.”

The prince didn’t even care about their reactions. He simply took statues, looked at them blankly, and repeatedly threw them onto the fire. He made sure to take some time to silently watch the statuettes, and it took him quite a long time to shove all of them into flames, what with his movements being so careful. The prince’s face looked very strange once he had offered all his carvings to the fire. It was as if he was

having a funeral for a family member. At best, they are just statues; everyone thought this.

Prince Adrian stood staring at the fire for a long time, softly whispering.

“Silent are the snowy peaks and the blood-drenched walls”

“Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance”

It was a true soul’s song that was sung in ages past before bloody piles of orc carcasses.

“The birds who’ve flown back along the road the wind passed by return”

“The fortress once exposed to cold and snow now wakes and stretches”

It was the song of sung of spring finally arriving after the harsh winter. And at that moment-

‘Hwarruk!’

A yellowish-blue flame then arose. It was the same color as the flame of his true spirit that the prince had ignited in the past before wielding his Aura Blade.

“I- Your Highness?”

Those looking at the prince were startled, but he wasn’t looking at them. He just continually stared at the blue flames.

“Goodbye.”

Then he greeted someone, and gone was his dullness, for his smile was bright.

CHAPTER 276
ADRIAN LEONBERGER (4)

The fire gradually subsided, and soon it completely died down. It was at that moment that the Crown Prince, who had been standing and looking at the flames, collapsed.

“Your Highness!”

Adelia embraced his pale body on the ground. Arwen quickly examined the prince’s condition; his eyes were closed and he was unmoving.

“Get him inside at once!”

Adelia, who was crying as she hugged the prince, jumped up and hurried him toward his palace.

“Sir Carls, go ahead and alert them of this. And bring the wizard! Bring him now!”

Carls Ulrich hurried away from the prince’s palace. In the meantime, the prince’s knights grew pale as they entered and noticed his state.

“The wizard! Is the wizard coming!” one of them yelled sharply.

“He’s coming.”

At this, Adelia clung to the Crown Prince, shedding tears. Arwen Kirgayen watched it all with her hardened face: the prince, pale and haggard; and the knights, yelling and weeping. A nightmarish vision entered her mind: the prince’s smiling face as he shoved his sword into his chest, with his body gradually tilting to the ground, finally becoming a cold corpse. She saw the crying knights, and she could not get close to him, she could merely look on blankly.

Her head suddenly jerked, and her feet and hands began to twitch. It was difficult for Arwen to breathe as her heart tightened.

“Wfoo. Whoo.”

She clenched her teeth and tried to banish the terrible scene from that day. However, no matter how hard she tried, her terrible imaginings did not disappear. Arwen stretched out her hand and took the prince’s.

Inwardly, she repeated countless times, ‘The coldness in his hand is merely because of the icy wind.’

‘Guoak!’

Without knowing it, she had clenched her hands.

‘Strt!’

Surprised by this, she relaxed her grasp. She then shuddered and carefully grabbed the prince’s hand once more.

‘Bwak!’ The door opened violently.

From beyond the aperture, Palace Knight Carls appeared. The wizard’s complexion, coming in behind Carls, was hard and stern. It seemed that ominous imaginings ran through his mind after he witnessed the atmosphere of panic among the knights.

“What are you doing? Come on, don’t just look at his Highness!”

The knights standing by the bedside gave voice to blood-curdling shouts. A grouping of lights appeared on the wizard’s fingertips. The constant screams of the knights ceased only then. While they watched on with stiff faces, the wizard reached out his hand and grasped the prince.

“Well…”

The wizard raised his head after his examination.

“I’m-”

“His Highness! How is His Highness?!”

“What the hell is wrong?!”

“Ooh! Is His Highness okay?”

The moment the wizard tried to speak, the knights poured out questions.

“Now, let’s take it easy,” he gently chided them.

However, the knights did not seem to calm down.

“His Highness merely fainted for a while because of his exhausted heart!” the wizard shouted, beginning to feel overwhelmed by the knights’ concern borne of their extreme loyalty.

“Good thing. It’s really good,” Carls said over and over again in a relieved tone with his eyes closed.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!” Adelia, weeping, now began to cry out loud.

“Alas…”

Then Arwen raised her hands to her temple and pressed onto her eyelids. Her throbbing heart’s pain, which felt as if a sword was stuck into her chest, subsided. The terrible thoughts that had entered her mind disappeared like lies. Her head became empty. All that remained was the thought of being fortunate. When she found such relief, the last of her strength left her. Her eyes felt wet, making her dry away the tears with her hand. Arwen opened her eyes and looked around.

Fortunately, no one was looking at her. She once again straightened her face, taking a deep breath. Arwen’s expression quickly took on its usual bluntness, and she spoke.

“Then, is His Highness okay?”

The wizard turned to her and nodded his head.

“He’s just sleeping, so there is nothing to worry about.”

Arwen once again sighed in relief.

‘Dwak!’

At that moment, the door opened and a man with pale skin entered.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

It was Vincent Balahard.

“He fainted for a while, but there seems nothing special about it.”

“You say there’s nothing wrong with him, so why did he fall? Look at his Highness again, healer!”

Seeing Vincent’s sad look, the wizard didn’t dare counter his words and once again studied the prince’s body.

“There is nothing wrong with him.”

“Thank you… thank you.”

Only then did Vincent breathe a sigh of relief and continually poured out words of gratitude toward the healer.

“That kid fell! What the hell happened?!”

Through the open door, the king appeared with his palace knights.

“He is asleep now. After a little rest, he will get up comfortably, so don’t be too concerned.”

“But why does a healthy man lose consciousness and faint?”

With the king having the same reaction as Vincent, the wizard sighed and gathered light at the tips of his hands again.

“It’s the same even after I’ve checked a few times. His Highness is merely sleeping.”

“Ah, that’s fortunate. That’s fortunate.”

The reassured king repeatedly said that it was fortunate.

“His Highness has fallen!?”

Then the old marquis entered, closing the door.

“What the hell is this about!”

One moment later, the Prime Minister opened the door and appeared.

“Brother! Brother!”

After hearing the news, the second prince had also come running, pale with terror.

“His Highness is fine.”

The wizard was still forced to prove the prince’s haleness to every visitor, so much so that his throat dried up and the energy within his body became exhausted.

* * *

“What the hell happened to my son, that he became so exhausted from his heart, reaching the point of fainting?”

In response to the king’s question, Carls stepped forward. He then, in detail, explained the lighting of the fire and the prince’s burning of the statues which he had made over the past month.

“In his Highness’s eyes, it looked as if he was attending a funeral for a family member.”

The king closed his eyes as he heard Carls say that the prince had said goodbye to someone. Then, after a while, the king opened his eyes and began speaking for some length.

“That boy is indeed ignorant. I don’t even know what’s in him, or how to get rid of the tangled skeins of his being. That a man who is knowledgeable about swords and war can be so ignorant and blind about himself…”

The king’s face became filled with guilt.

“This is because, when he was a child, when he needed warmth, he was so isolated that he missed the opportunity to learn about people. He didn’t know people, and he didn’t know about himself either.”

The king continued to say that everything was his fault.

“Such a boy has wandered battlefields for seven years now. How many deaths has he seen so far, and how many deaths plague his memory? To know that my son, who has not learned how to loosen the knots in his heart, has faced so many countless deaths… Even my own insides would be rotted and rubbed raw at such sights. If only I had known… he wouldn’t have to cry out, feverish, groaning in his nightmares of those who’ve died.”

Hearing the king’s words, all the knights except Adelia stretched their eyes wide.

“What is that?” Vincent asked.

“You didn’t know? No matter how much you two are friends, you could only know after sleeping in the same room as my son. It’s natural that you don’t know.”

The king went on to tell them what he had seen on the night the queen had died, when the Crown Prince had been beset by fever.

“Oh, Sir Adelia- Are his Majesty’s words true?” Vincent asked, which made Adelia burst into tears once more.

“Yes… In fact, His Highness…”

It was through her words that the knights came to know the truth. What kind of nightmares have the Crown Prince been suffering from, they wondered?

“Well… After the queen went so bravely, it got worse. And later, there was no night when his Highness was not sick and groaning.”

The knights closed their eyes tightly.

“Because my son couldn’t even mourn and process everything properly, he got sick. When he was sick, he grunted and groaned all night without even knowing about it. When he woke up, he again grabbed his sword even if his stomach was so raw and rotten with grief.”

Even while the other knights despaired after hearing of the prince’s situation, being sick all alone, the king spoke on.

“My son has seen all those who have departed, now. Since he has been distant and cut off for seven years straight, how can he not feel it? But since he has forcibly

removed such accumulated feelings and burned them on the fire… Will his suffering be less?" the king wondered, affirming that it was not chunks of wood that the Crown Prince had carved over the past month, but a part of his own heart—and that which he had burned today was surely that sliver of his heart, not statuettes.

"No wonder he said goodbye with a bright smile. It could have been no different—he couldn't even shed tears because he never learned to cry."

The king stopped talking. Then he suddenly bowed his head to the knights.

"Hwa- Your Majesty?"

"Why does your Majesty lower your head!"

The knights exclaimed their surprise with great terror. The king did not raise his head, however. He just stated, "You will lead the effort. Help me so that my son can fill the void in his heart, which he has cut open, pulled out, and emptied."

The remorseful father said he could only watch and that they were the only ones who could soothe the prince's empty heart. One by one, the king made eye contact with the knights.

"It is not just my sword that I have dedicated to his Highness, so I will do this with all my heart."

"Is there any man that would pretend not to know the brother who shares his blood? Need I say more?"

"There is no right for us to lead from the front, but with bright eyes and strong legs, we will guard and follow from behind."

Meeting the king's gaze, Arwen, Vincent, and Carls each responded respectively with a strong, friendly, or determined expression. Adelia said nothing, clutching the prince's hand tightly as she shed tears. But even if she didn't answer, her resolve was as clear as day, and everyone knew of her faithfulness in keeping close to the prince. The king now looked at his son with a more comfortable face.

"Please have a good dream."

**

I was dreaming. In my dream, I was a little boy. There was nothing special about me, and even though I was of royal birth, my qualities could be seen in any child. But unfortunately, this child was a person who should not be ordinary. The world compelled me to be bold and extraordinary, and people have always demanded more than I was able to be.

This child tried, but the fruit people wanted him to pluck were always high, out of his reach.

Still, he tried. And the effort shrunk him.

“This country, founded by our ancestors through blood and sweat, is on the verge of becoming a windy wasteland. You have to keep your mind sharp and make greater efforts.”

The only things that came from my father’s mouth, when I needed warmth, were words of rebuke and not of comfort.

“Ian, I’m sorry, but mommy is busy now. Let’s talk again later.”

My mother, who was always the only element that could appease my loneliness, always pledged that we would talk at another time. There was no place for this child to find rest anywhere in the vast world; there was no single person to take care of him among multitudes of people.

Then some things happened.

“Yes! What are you doing?!”

His father’s anger was like an inferno. This child, not knowing what was going on, was simply terrified as he waited for his father’s wroth to abate. However, even after some time passed, his father remained angered.

“You don’t deserve to lead this country!”

In the face of anger that increased with every passing day, the child one day walked, then ran to the edge of a cliff.

“Ian!”

His mother came then and reached out her hand, but the already terrified child ran away, not for a second thinking of grasping her hand. At the end of his flight, the place he stopped at was covered in shade.

“Your Highness… You’re a man who’s got it hard, but for you, the world will become a flower garden. All the troubles and ills of the word will disappear, far away.”

The child’s mind was so crowded with tormenting thoughts that he could not resist these cunning whispers.

And so, he placed his hand on a substance he shouldn’t have touched. He got through that day with a hazy spirit, made drunk by the strange gift.

“It’s not your Highness’s fault… What is wrong is the world.”

He endured every day, comforted by the wicked whispers he heard in the midst of his confused dreams. Meanwhile, more contempt and ridicule than ever before began to fill the child’s world. It was then that a man who others called a foreigner, his uncle, came to him, a man whose face he could not even remember.

“This boy can never be a king of men.”

Seeing the child scatterbrained, drunk on something, this man left the palace in fiery anger. After he left, dozens of heads were mounted on stakes on the plain outside the capital. These were the severed heads of the gang who had provided the child with his only succor.

“Well, that’s it. Count Balahard has announced that those who ever again offer something to obscure his Highness’s spirit will have their limbs severed and their eyes dug out by crows,” the boy heard the king declare.

He began wandering through the alleys in search of a new group of suppliers but couldn’t get what he wanted. All that came to his hands was a strange poison. This poison the child sent north, guided by his hatred. Over time, the confusion that had dominated his mind faded away. And in front of the reality he faced, the boy was sorrowful.

Hatred, contempt; contempt, anger—what could a child do in the face of such suffocating evil?

“Do you dare look at me with your eyes!”

He simply yelled, swinging his hands and feet while treating everyone with an evil spirit. Like a wounded beast, he roared while concealing his weakness and turning away from his fears. But he already knew: the truth was that he was very wrong. Yet the shouts that he had begun shouting in horror hardened into a habit; he became depraved and violent. His spasms and screams that hid his weakness and fear morphed into violence done against the weak.

By the time the boy realized this, he was, unfortunately, too far gone.

He couldn’t go back; he could not return.

“Don’t you want to set everything back to normal?”

It was then that the Empire’s ambassador came to him with slick words.

“Get the Dragon Slayer.”

Ian could not ignore the possibility of everything returning to as it was if only he obtained the founding king’s sword. And finally, he got his hands on the royal sword. Now he could get everything back; he could correct his past mistakes!

The child believed this, and he died believing it. And after his demise, he wandered through the endless void, ultimately consumed by darkness. All that remained of him were his memories imprinted within my mind, the thoughts of his life before he had forgotten his very existence.

{I didn’t mean to… I never wanted to live like this}

Thoughts of regret and despair.

{I want to live- But I don’t want to live}

Remorse and fear.

{You are better than me}

Envy and admiration.

{I'd rather be you}

Jealousy.

{Rather, if I were you… }

Craving.

{If I can't… }

Determination

{Through you I can-}

Hope.

{I will exist in the world}

Expectation.

{I request… }

Desperation.

{Adrian Leonberger-}

These were the thoughts that overflowed within my mind.

{Live well}

And finally, they returned to nothingness. Another person's thoughts arose in their place.

{Past and present—I chose one of them when the vague boundary came to an end}

It was a greeting left for me at the last minute by the mage who had given me her source of life.

{The long and deep dreams are finally over}

{There are still things that are lacking, things that need to be learned… things that need to be recovered, but you will do well}

I was so glad to hear the voice I had so missed, filled with the same love and concern as when she had been alive.

{It could become confusing}

I was hoping her words would last for a long time.

{But ease your thoughts}

{You were merely born again}

But, ferociously, Ophelia's thoughts quickly faded.

{Happy birthday to you, Ian}

Then, when I finally stopped hearing her voice-

'Fshwa!'

I woke up from my dreams.

'Bka! Bka!'

I felt an ear-splitting sound, and at that moment-

'Pwoo!'

Light burst from my body—from my left chest, where my heart was.

CHAPTER 277
THERE WAS A REAL GIFT (1)

At this, the light promptly disappeared in an instant. Before I could even figure it out, I knew by instinct that something had changed. However, I could not figure out what it was. At best, I only knew of the degree to which my heart more vigorously jumped in my chest. I no longer felt the terrible helplessness that had haunted me since I died and came back to life.

It was refreshing.

It wasn't overflowing, but the vitality that was there was spinning around in my body. There seemed to be something else, but right now I had no way to know what it was. I would have to observe it more over time. Let's not be impatient, I was saying to myself when I heard an overly dazed voice murmuring. I turned my head and saw Adelia.

As always, she had fallen asleep whilst guarding my side, with the flash that had occurred now having awoken her.

"Ha-am," she yawned, rubbing her eyes, then glanced out of the window.

"I thought it was morning," Adelia mumbled softly as she stood up.

I then watched as she moved like a sleepwalker, moving to the fireplace. When she stopped, she gathered a few logs and pushed them into the hearth. Then she sat down, blankly staring at the flames.

'Gcha Tcha!'

After a while, she lifted her body, starting to move around to the room as she shook her hands. She opened the window to let some fresh air in, and then closed it again. Next, she refilled the water bottle standing on the bedside. Then she carefully neatened the ruffled blanket on the bed. And when Adelia was done dealing with chores that could have been done by a servant, she suddenly started massaging my body. It seemed that she was worried that my limbs would become stiff with all the

lying down. Her hand movements were so gentle and warmth bloomed in every corner of my heart. This was surely not the first time she had managed to massage me today. She must have been caring for my body until now, without anyone even knowing. I was so grateful and loving toward her for such constant dedication and service. So, I could not stop myself from laughing.

“What?”

Only then did Adelia turn to face me. My eyes, still half-open after I had woken in a daze, quickly widened.

“I- Your Highness?” She stuttered as she looked at me blankly. Tears filled her hazy eyes.

“You’re awake, Your Highness…”

“Adelia,” I answered with a slight smile, and the tears that had welled up in her eyes began creeping down her cheeks.

“Your Highness!”

Adelia rushed closer to me, crying.

‘Strt!’

Whilst almost hugging me, she deftly stopped herself.

“It’s okay.”

She still looked at me with the same expression.

“It’s really okay,” I told her, my arms wide open, and she dug herself into them.

“Your Highness! Your Highness! Your Highness!”

I continued to tell her I was all right while she called to me again and again in a nasal voice.

‘Kuadangtang!’

There came a noise from outside.

‘Bwak!’

The door was opened violently. Through the portal, I saw the face of the palace knight dearest to me.

“Your Highness…”

In a short span of time, countless emotions emerged and disappeared on his handsome face. Then, in the end, only an expression of joy and relief remained.

“Oh, I’ll go and bring the wizard.”

Carls swung about and ran out through the door.

“His Highness has awakened!”

Carls’ shouts echoed through the quiet halls, and the royal palace, which had been slumbering, woke up.

* * *

Those who felt most concerned about me visited my palace.

“You caused me a lot of worries,” the king said with a smile as he patted my shoulder, yet his face revealed that his stern judgment remained intact.

“You couldn’t even walk properly! What did you think you were doing, with such a cold wind blowing outside! What, do you want your body to get sicker?” Vincent was angry.

“I waited for you to wake up,” Arwen said with a faint smile.

“Brother. Please take care of yourself.”

Maximilian looked at me again and again with his bloodshot eyes. Though each of them expressed it in different ways, the emotions they showed were the same: extreme concern tempered with a sense of relief—and feelings of guilt and compassion. The first two emotions weren’t too strange, but I struggled to

understand the latter two.

“You’ve had a hard time.”

“From now on, rather stay inside,” Arwen stated.

When I asked her why she only offered an incomprehensible answer, while the conversation went on, the wizard looked at my body. He had checked my condition a few times so far, but I felt that he was doing so very intently today, out of all days.

“I’m really okay now,” I complained, finding his meticulous examination to be overwhelming. Vincent glared at me with warring emotions in his eyes.

“Do not mind the prince’s words,” he said, “and look closely without missing anything.”

The king even ordered the healer to check again to see if he had not missed anything. Eventually, I was made to lie in bed until the sun rose, watching as the wizard went over my body.

“It looks like there was some heavenly help. Rather than his energy being weakened, his body is in a better state than before.”

Those who heard the healer’s report sighed in relief.

“Look- I said I was okay.”

Ever since I woke up, I’ve been complaining about the needless concern, but there was no one who understood my feelings.

**

From that day on, I quickly started to feel better. With great speed, after three days, my body recovered to the extent that I could take short walks without being supported by others. However, my broken mana heart showed no sign of recovery. If I said I wasn’t impatient, I would be lying, and if I said I was not discouraged, it would be another lie.

It’s been seven years—for the past seven years, I have lived with my swords as extensions of my body. I had accumulated mana day by day. I had desperately

struggled to overcome the paltry talent of this body. It was a body that I had honed to completion only after suffering to the brink of death, and my mana was gained through the same deadly struggles.

However, now, all of it disappeared overnight.

My body, which had achieved its apotheosis, had now become like that of the terminally sick, and the mana that had once flowed through me had scattered everywhere.

If the feeling of this loss was small, that would have been weird indeed. At first, I had desperately hidden such feelings. Whenever my mind became soaked by such thoughts, even for a moment, I quickly became anxious and didn't want to look at the people around me. However, my knights, who I couldn't help but hold dear, rendered my efforts to hide the inner state of my heart void. Yet, they did not comfort me with words; they merely pretended not to know—except for Vincent.

"Swords aren't everything in life. Look at me—how long has it been since I wielded a sword? I've forgotten how to hold one by now."

He was the one who consoled me, saying that I should not become panicked by my loss.

I was gladdened by his willingness to help me and his concern, but I felt desperate nonetheless.

"I'm not proud… I'm someone who wants to wield a sword, but I can't."

So I was able to talk openly with Vincent, without hesitation. Of course, dealing with the other knights now became more comfortable. Vincent's crude consolation and the silent, honest support of the others made me very grateful. It was a gratitude I had never felt before losing my strength; it was an emotion I would not have comprehended in my old hasty existence. It somehow felt as if one side of my heart was being tickled, and I liked that unfamiliar feeling.

Probably, at some point, I would no longer have to hide my inner self from them.

"Do you ever want to wield a sword properly? Then please do not fall like last time when the cold wind hits into you," Vincent said bluntly some days later as we watched the palace knights practicing in the training hall.

“Are you ignoring that I don’t have mana right now? I’m really sad about it.”

“It is sad. I’m not ignoring it, it’s true… But see, these knights, they are not slowing down their swords for the sake of your Highness’s feelings.”

“Yet it’s also part of training to practice slow swings.”

“You didn’t do that before, but these days, you would be forced to.”

“You keep talking unkindly,” I noted.

“It’s because of my mood. I’m just talking to myself,” Vincent said, then suddenly seemed to remember to ask, “Why are you skulking around the palace these days?”

“I just felt bored.”

Vincent looked at me in a pathetic manner with a face that seemed to rebuke me for making the servants suffer merely because of my boredom.

“Why? Who said what?” I demanded.

It was an undeniable fact that I’ve been running around the palace these days, so I was a bit stung.

“Do I have to say that for you to know? Of course, it’s uncomfortable for them.”

“Yes, you keep telling me that.”

“To say it openly, I’m still the only duke of the kingdom, and your Highness’s cousin. There is no fault that I am not willing to deal with.”

“Then why don’t you rather do the same thing as me?”

“Are you serious?”

When I looked at Vincent’s face, after he had spoken so much, I could see I wouldn’t get a quick answer from him. I didn’t know what he was trying to make me do, but I have faced his constant nagging. If my words made him uncomfortable, it seemed that he himself struggled to face my own nagging.

“I’m not saying anything directly, Vincent, but I want to know if they are uncomfortable or not,” I spoke, making sure to maintain a moderate tone.

“It’s common sense. If the prince suddenly comes into the kitchen, or pops up into a room where the maids are working, and suddenly speaks to them in the middle of their labors, the servants will, of course, become uncomfortable.”

Vincent continued his carping, listing all my travels over the past few days.

“Everyone was friendly when they saw me. When I talked to them, they seemed to like it, or did they lie?”

“They try to hide the fact that they don’t like it, they are afraid something would happen if they don’t pretend.”

I was starting to get annoyed by Vincent’s scolding when he asked me, “So why are you doing it?”

“It’s amazing,” came my profound response as I swallowed down the complaints that had reached the tip of my tongue.

“What?”

“Just… everything, everything!”

I wasn’t just saying it. Now that my body has reached this state, the world looked different to me. Obviously, neither my hearing nor vision was as it had been before, yet I was seeing the world clearer now. The hazy layer of mist had risen from the snow; it felt as if a curtain had been lifted from my eyes. I wandered all across the palace because I liked to take in the vividness of life.

“It’s because I died, yet live. It’s all new and amazing.”

I could see that Vincent had decided to stop his nagging.

“Fwoo… Do whatever you want. I don’t know anymore,” he said with a sigh after a while, and then stayed silent. The sun was setting, and I got up.

“Let’s go. It’s cold.”

I fastened my collar and returned to my palace. When I entered my room, I immediately grabbed the carving knife. As if Adelia had been waiting, she picked up a piece of wood and handed it over to me. I had commemorated the past by carving elaborate statuettes over the past month, but it wasn't just my old friends that I should remember and mourn for. I began trimming the piece of wood, pursuing nostalgic memories in my mind. I was intently busy with my carving when Vincent asked me a question.

"But weren't you finished with sculpting? Is there any reason to make these weird statues again?"

I laid down my work for a moment, recalling all those old memories. I remembered a shabby barracks, right after the battle was over, with a warrior sitting on the ground, engrossed in something without even having wiped the blood off her body. I asked why she was wasting her time carving statues, for I couldn't understand it; why did she do it when her body was wracked by fatigue after repeated battles, when there was scarcely enough time for sleep?

She smiled and answered my questions.

She had said, 'Because the faces of the dead quickly fade. But if you sculpt like this, you have to keep thinking of the face whether you like it or not, so it stays a little longer in your mind. Then, when it fully fades from memory, you look at the sculpture again, and the face comes to your mind.'

I started carving again.

"If you forget a face, you'll think of it again when you look at the statue," I replied briefly, adding, "and nothing is weird about it."

"Apart from their purpose, shouldn't you be able to make them well in order to do that?"

I pretended not to hear him. After I had been focused on my work for a long time, Vincent asked, "So who are you making this time?"

Still moving the carving knife, I responded profoundly.

"My uncle."

Vincent remained silent. However, it was only for a while, for he began speaking in a trembling voice.

“Is that my father?”

“Uh-huh… Doesn’t it look similar to him?”

“There is no similar feature, and there wouldn’t be even if I washed my eyes.”

“I know you’re like this, Vincent. It’s not new anymore.”

“Have your Highness ever thought that the problem lies with you and not with me?”

“I don’t have any problem… My work isn’t a problem.”

“If that piece of wood doesn’t resemble him, why should I be forced to say it does?”

“Shall I call Arwen again and ask-”

Vincent batted the statue out of my hands before I was even done speaking, with it falling to the floor and snapping at the neck.

‘Degur!’

As I watched the head rolling over the floor, I instinctively shouted, “Uncle!”

“How is that my father?!”

**

As the sun rose, I wandered around the palace. I explored places I had never been to before and captured sights in my mind that I’ve never seen.

“Isn’t it cold?” an old servant asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Well, your Highness, you may be all right, but I’m cold.”

I spoke idly to the man, then moved on. I squatted as I watched the gardener trim

flowers.

“It smells good.”

“Take a bite. It’s just delicious.”

While watching the palace chef stir his pot, I ate.

It was pleasurable to me to follow the maids and watch what they did. Although Vincent had nagged me about this many times, I chose to ignore him. In recent years, his nagging has gotten worse. In addition to the comfortable manner in which he now spoke to me, his chiding was incomparable to the past. Still, it was good for me to back from death, and it was good that my dear ones took care of me with extreme sincerity. It was also nice to see the world clearly with fresh senses. But not everything was good.

After waking up from death, especially after I fainted and fell, it seemed to me that other people saw me as a child who no longer walked upon the shore of greatness. I didn’t want to be treated like some kid with a nosebleed. When I walked like this, I could hear the footsteps of four or five, sometimes dozens of people behind me. They usually watched me quietly, but I knew if I were to do anything else, they would block me. Thanks to that, I couldn’t do anything. Really—nothing. All I could do was stay in my room and carve sculptures or wander around the palace. While exploring the palace like that, I chanced to overhear a conversation. It seemed that something had happened in the kingdom.

“Nothing goes on. The kingdom is quite calm.”

Whenever I asked about the situation outside, the answer was the same. I suspected the king’s order to be behind this.

This wasn’t the first time, and it wasn’t something I couldn’t understand. It was only recently that I had died and reawakened. And when I had fainted, concerns about my health had only deepened. Of course, just because I had expected such a decree didn’t mean I would follow it. While wandering through the royal palace, I made my way toward the hall. Perhaps because I had already wandered about everywhere, those who followed me continued to do so without doubting my intentions.

“Your Highness, we greet you.”

The palace knights guarding the door looked at me and hardened their expressions.

“Ah, I do not want to cause a lot of trouble. I was just walking.”

Seeing them pretending to greet me in a normal manner while subtly blocking my entry, I greeted them in turn, emphasizing that I had come here by accident.

“But it looks like more guests have arrived?”

At this, alertness flashed over the palace knights’ faces. They kept their mouths shut firmly, giving no answer. It didn’t matter—I already knew. I didn’t have to have received news to guess that important guests were visiting the kingdom. Vincent, who had so brazenly been in and out of my palace, hadn’t shown up all day. The Marquis of Bielefeld had left his office and the prime minister had also vacated the ministry and disappeared somewhere.

I had not seen the nose of one single important personage of Leonberg. I bet that they were all inside the war room or the hall proper.

“Well, that’s not something I’ll know about. I’ll go, so keep up the good work.”

I roughly waved at the knights and turned around. To be precise, I pretended to do so, suddenly rushing back toward the door. However, after all the damage done to it, my body was so sluggish that even before I got to the hall’s door the palace knights blocked me off.

“His Majesty has commanded that no one is to enter. Please forgive me.”

As I listened to the palace knight talking without changing his expression, my face burned. It was embarrassing.

But embarrassment wouldn’t stop my curiosity, so I rushed forward again and tried to dig past the knights. But before I had even passed their first rank, they formed a new barrier in front of me. I tried several times, but the result was the same.

“Just go back,” the palace knight said, clearly trying to remain patient. Like when he had first blocked me, his face remained consistently determined. My shoulders soon drooped.

“Even if I guessed it would be like this, it shouldn’t be.”

The knight's face, having been as hard as a cliff, started to show cracks.

"Well, your Highness…"

Listening to the embarrassed knight, I regretted it all over again.

"Because I have no power now, even the lords ignore me completely."

"Your Highness, they don't have that kind of hearts!"

"If they didn't, then I would at least have been able to enter the hall—a place to which I was free to come and go when I had the strong body of the Crown Prince."

"I can't handle it! Please temper your words, your Highness!"

The palace knights knelt in front of me, and I-

'Chuck!'

I passed by them and reached the door.

"Yes, I guess I misunderstood you."

"Us, your Highness?"

The knights looked blankly on as I passed by.

"Anyway, thanks for opening the way."

Regardless of having fooled them, I focused on the task at hand.

"Your Highness!"

As I heard the knights scream behind me, I flung the door open as hard as I could.

'Dwak!'

CHAPTER 278
THERE WAS A REAL GIFT (2)

As soon as I opened the door, a symbol of three interlocked shields came to my eyes. The emblem engraved upon black metal was familiar to me. I lifted my head and saw that Vincent was looking down at me. He clucked his tongue as if disappointed.

“What?” He spat out, then glanced back inside the hall. Because of Vincent’s uselessly large body, I could hardly see the scene inside the room.

“It’s time to go.”

“Who the hell is visiting?” I asked, and Vincent frowned in reply

“I’ll not allow it, your Highness.”

I ignored Vincent, who spoke harshly to me, and twisted my head. However, no matter how much I tried, I couldn’t see past him.

“When you made your vow, you said you would be my castle, become my wall… now you’re blocking me?”

I trembled with a sense of betrayal as I stared at him. Of course, my jibe didn’t work. Rather, Vincent laughed.

‘Thud!’

He stepped forward with a heavy tread, easily pushing me back. It was easier for him than for the palace knights, who would not readily touch my body.

“Uh- Uh.”

As Vincent pushed me back, I stumbled.

“Oh, all right. I’ll go.”

Even when I said I would leave, he didn't lower his guard for a second. Eventually, I had to blankly watch as the hall's door was shut. This came after I had used the finest subtlety to get past the palace knights—in that moment, all my hard work came to naught.

"Should I take you to the palace?" Vincent asked

"I have my own feet. I'm going."

I fled from there with a whimper but came back after a short time. Vincent was still standing at the door looking towards me—with a mirthful face as if he had known my intentions from the start. I frowned. It was no hard task to fool the palace knights, but Vincent was another story altogether. I gave up halfway and turned around, thinking that I wouldn't be able to sway him. I went straight to my palace and sat down in a corner of the garden, recalling the situation at the hall. I hadn't been able to look inside because of Vincent, but that didn't mean I had seen nothing. Just before the door was closed, I had seen strangers over Vincent's shoulder, unknown folk wrapped in brown cloth from head to toe. They were probably the rumored guests.

"Who the hell are they?"

In the middle of the royal palace, they had stood in front of the monarch without even having removed their hoods. I couldn't even guess who they were.

"If I wait, I'll find out."

When his business is done, Vincent will come to my palace, and if I waited until then, I would be able to sate my curiosity. But-

"Why won't he come?!"

Vincent didn't visit my palace, even when the night grew deep. It was the same case the next day. I then intuitively knew that he must be deliberately avoiding me. He didn't want to meet me and face my questions, never coming to my palace.

"Then I have to go."

I was about to leave and find Vincent or someone who would tell me the guests' identity when a messenger came. He informed me that, in the name of the king, I was

denied access to the main palace until the order was countermanded.

“Oh, really?! That’s shit!”

I would rather let him punish me; I would ignore the message and go to the palace. The messenger spoke on, saying if I did that, other knights would be punished for not preventing me from sating my curiosity.

“Why don’t you just tell me?!”

I could no longer hold down my resentment and irritation and I shouted, then suddenly felt someone gazing at me—Adelia. She was clearly afraid I would faint again as I let my temper loose. While I watched her anxious gaze, my pulse slowed. It seemed that coming back from death wasn’t always good, especially when I couldn’t get angry, like now.

“What about the marshal or prime minister? Arwen?” I asked Carls where the others were.

“I know everyone is in the hall with his Majesty.”

“Ha.”

I could only laugh at the insulting situation, with everyone deciding to turn away from me, keeping me in the dark. I felt like I had in the past when I had secretly checked the identity of visitors from the wall.

“Wall?”

Suddenly, a thought entered my head “His Majesty has banned me from accessing the main palace.”

Realization slowly dawned on me.

“That means it’s okay for me to go anywhere except the palace, right?”

“What do you mean?” Carls asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I mean, I’m going out of the palace,” I replied profoundly, facing him.

Carls shifted his eyes, twisting his face into a frown.

'Shh!'

While he blankly stared at me like that, Adelia quietly began to move around the room. She grabbed a fur cloak and other paraphernalia and brought it all to me.

"Sir Adelia?" Carls, who still drew a blank, asked Adelia what she was doing.

"I'm trying to get his Highness ready for the wind," she replied, as if it was completely natural. Curls puffed his mouth up. "A different one, Adelia. It's too grand. Please pick modest clothes, for example," I ignored Carls as I ordered Adelia, "pick clothes that wouldn't be used by royalty."

We were going to sneak about on this outing, so I told her we had to prepare accordingly.

"Your Majesty! No!" Carls cried in fear as he snapped out of his vacant state, but neither I nor Adelia responded.

**

"Maybe your highness will fall again."

Carls' nagging was constant.

"Your Highness, can't this wait until tomorrow?"

"Your Highness, even now…"

He said that if his Majesty knew, he would be punished severely and that it was not too late for me to change my mind, even now.

"If you're going to do that, it will be the same as entering the palace. Don't go out and do something."

"I'm just doing my job," I snapped at Carls, who would usually have stepped back at this point.

"Look, Adelia is being quiet, the other knights are being quiet, so why do you alone

complain, Carls?"

"Because the others can't speak, I do," Carls nagged on, and I wondered whether Vincent had infected him with his behavior.

"If you keep flapping your mouth, I'll leave you behind."

I couldn't put up with it and made clear that if he said another word, I would separate him from our sortie. Carls' nagging, which seemed as if it would never end, ceased only then.

"And how do you know others will know?" I asked.

"There is no place in the palace without eyes, no place without ears. Earlier or later, his Majesty will know."

"So? If we change into this and go out, we'll be okay."

I grabbed a black cloak and pushed it out to Carls. It was a cold-weather cloak worn by the Balahard Rangers.

"No matter how frequently the Balahard Rangers come and go, the guards will quickly notice. The number of rangers who've entered the palace today is not the same as the number that have left."

"But they aren't out already?"

"What will you do when you come back? The checkpoint security will be loose when you leave, but the situation will be different if you try to come back."

"Ah, I don't know! I'm already going out, so what should I do?"

Carls sighed as he faced my stubborn temper.

"I'm really going to leave you here, so stop it."

So I once again sealed Carls' mouth, and we began wandering the capital. The citizens weren't particularly alert even if they saw us in our ranger disguises, and this was natural. Many of the rangers Vincent had led here were stationed in Templar Castle, with the others staying in the capital with their lord. For the citizens,

the sight of Balahard Rangers wasn't uncommon, nor was it a group they had to be wary of.

"Oh! Balahard Rangers! Come and taste this."

"It's cold, but there is a lot here to ease your hardships!"

Rather, hospitality followed us everywhere we went. I was proud of it and very happy to know that the rangers, who had only suffered in their harsh fortress, were welcomed by the capital's populace.

So, instead of pretending to be unaware of their hospitality, I approached them and went along with it.

"Oh! It's delicious!"

"By nature, this fruit is real good when it's cold!"

I stopped at a kiosk and chewed the fruit the kind merchant handed me.

"It's so impossibly cold today that I feel like melting myself in the flames."

"Is that so?"

People who were gathered around a fire warmed themselves while chatting with each other.

"Your Highness, please… I won't tell you to go back to the palace anymore, but keep a little distance."

Each time, Carls pleaded with me with a tight, nervous face, but I didn't even pretend to hear him. I wandered about the capital like that for a long time. The sun had been floating in the middle of the sky, now it began tilting toward the horizon. I finally stopped a citizen who was about to pass me by, then asked him where the busiest tavern in the city was.

"No! People who are drunk can lose their reason! They can get caught up in quarrels!" Carls shouted, opposing my intentions.

"That's the beauty of a bar!" I exclaimed.

“Your Highness-”

“You’re very worried about it? We have a few knights gathered here right now, and even champions. What the hell are you so worried about?” I scolded Carls, saying he wasn’t bold.

“No! Please reconsider!”

He continued to pressure me, but I had already made up my mind. At least one half of my purpose in leaving the palace was to go to a bar. It wasn’t as if I had never been in one, though. When I was with the Mercenary King, I had visited bars several times. Even if I had just been a piece of metal, the noisy atmosphere at the time had felt very lively. I wanted to experience that vibrant scene and feel the overflowing vitality with my very own human body. In addition, the Mercenary King had been a surly miser, so I only ever saw him sitting in corners and eating his meals in the dark. I had never experienced the true atmosphere of a bar.

Eventually, despite Carls’ continuous pressure, we finally headed to the tavern.

“Oh! They’ve already started!”

The bar was busy this early already, with the sun still in the sky, and I was excited by the noise that reached my ears through the door.

‘Dwak!’

I opened the door with vigor and entered the bar. Many drunkards looked at our party at once. The noise I had heard from outside suddenly stopped, and energy bloomed from the bodies of the tense knights. But before the energy washed into the room-

“It’s the Balahard Rangers!”

“Here! Here! Come sit this side!”

“Barman, put away the fine liquor! The rangers are here, and they’ll drink it all!”

The drunkards greeted us with shouts. Even I, who had wandered the capital all day, growing accustomed to the citizens’ hospitality, was surprised. The next thing I knew, I was sitting at a table in the middle of the bar.

“What- Aren’t you too young? No… Should I say young?”

One of the drunkards stared at my hooded face as he spoke.

“Sure looks young,” another stated. “Are you new?”

“No matter how much I look at you, I can’t think that you’re old enough to have participated in the Orc War.”

“Ah, it’s been a long time since I listened to the sagas of the good rangers… Just our luck that younglings came here.”

Though the patrons’ faces were still expressive, the anticipation they had shown a little while ago was gone.

“You think so!” I exclaimed. “I’m the one who saw the beginning and end of the Orc War! No one knows better about the war with the greenskins than I do!”

Seeing them listen to me like that, I grew a little troubled. Carls and his knights looked at me with hard faces. I felt that it was too late to stop now; I had already made my entrance. Looking at the expectant faces of the drunks, I kept making noise.

“Now, I will tell you about the orcs’ rise and fall!”

“Oh oh oh oh!”

The drunkards shouted as if they doubted me.

“It was just seven years ago! Unusual signs were found everywhere in the Blade’s Edge Mountains beyond the fortress, and the atmosphere was strange!”

I stood from my seat and shook my arms as I gesticulated, not giving my throat a moment’s rest as I told them of the battles with the orcs.

“I severed an orc’s head! I crushed one’s throat under my boot!”

“Ooh oh oh oh oh!”

“…That day, none of the orcs survived to leave the fortress.”

“Kyaah!”

“But they’re a persistent tribe, with more groups assaulting the walls the next day…”

“Fuck Orcs!”

The drunkards rewarded my hard work with laughter, cries, curses, and earnest cheers.

So, I became excited.

“It feels good to tell this tale! Drinks are on me today!”

It was then that their mood reached fever pitch, with the drunks starting to jump about wildly.

“Ranger! Ranger!”

“Rangers! Rangers!”

They chanted, praising the name of the Balahard Rangers.

“For Balahard!”

“For the shield of the kingdom!”

The drunks raised their glasses and shouted cheers.

“I’ve seen a lot of Balahard Rangers, but I’ve never seen an angry guy like you. If you tell me your name, I’ll definitely remember it.”

One of them asked me for a name.

“I’m-”

I almost said my own name, then immediately gave him another one in my eagerness.

“Jordan! Ranger Jordan is my name!”

“Oh oh! Ranger Jordan!”

Several times, I gave alcohol to people who were already drunk. The tavern heated up, with the air becoming moist and clammy. Even my face was getting hot.

There was laughing, screaming, and a whole lot of noise—somewhere, a glass broke and a table was overturned. There was no greater mess than this.

“Your Highness… No more.”

Carls grabbed me, saying it was time to leave. I, too, had gotten tired of the utterly chaotic atmosphere, so I pretended I had to get some fresh air and went out of the bar with Carls. I only realized it after leaving-

“Oh, I didn’t pay for the drinks.”

I was so distracted that I had forgotten to calculate what I owed.

“Shall I go back now and settle the tab?” Carls asked.

“It’s okay. I told them my name, so they’ll know who to ask.”

“Didn’t you name yourself Ranger Jordan?”

“Uh-huh.”

Carls turned away from me, his face showing that he didn’t know what to do anymore. Then, as we walked down the road, he gently recommended that we had to go back to the palace.

“No, there are still more places to go to.”

“Where is your Highness talking about now?”

Hearing Carls sigh, I turned to Adelia.

“Take the lead.”

“Your Highness?”

I smiled at her, her whose dreamy eyes showed she didn't understand.

"I've decided to have a meal with your family, Adelia."

Her head jerked, and she stared at me.

"Go- You mean suddenly?"

"Why not?"

"No… How can your Highness go to such a shabby place…"

"What? It's shabby? I told Gung Jungbaek to find them a proper home. Did he not do his work properly? I didn't kill him slowly enough, then…"

"I meant that it wasn't a place for a noble lord like your Highness to step into."

"Why isn't it a place I can enter? You said you have a family, Adelia. Your younger brother is there too."

"He is, but-"

"If you are Adelia's younger brother, you are not simply 'no one' to me."

I wasn't just saying it—if he had Adelia's blood, he was Anne's descendant. It was rather ridiculous to treat Anne's family like peasants. Of course, even if he had not been of Bavarian blood, the fact that he was Adelia's brother already meant enough to me.

"Your Highness…"

Adelia looked at me, clearly not thrilled. She then began to guide us, taking the lead, her face remaining worried. It wasn't clear why she needed such great convincing to head to her own home, but we reached it eventually as we followed her. It was not far from the royal palace in a residential area with quite large structures. Adelia came to stand before one with an impressive red roof and looked at me.

"I'll go in first and get things ready…"

"What's there to prepare? We're ready. We're going in."

I walked to the front of the house, pushing the hesitant Adelia's back.

'Sdak'

Perhaps having heard the sound of the door, someone inside poked his head around a corner. He had smooth light brown hair and sharp green eyes.

"Sister? Why are you back so sudden? Who is that next to you…"

He was a very handsome boy, one who looked just like Anne.

Looking at the boy, who looked at me with those eyes, I-

"Hello?"

I decided to greet him nicely.

CHAPTER 279
THERE WAS A REAL GIFT (3)

The boy who stared blankly at me turned his head and Adelia nodded at him. His eyes widened as she did.

“Long live the Leonberg kingdom. Long live the Leonberger royal family.”

A moment later, his knees hit the floor.

“Christopher of the Bavaria family greets his Highness the Crown Prince.”

I couldn’t see any flaws in the way he carried himself.

“Very well.”

However, I had looked closely—just before he got down to his knees, emotions had flared up in his green eyes, even if for a short moment. It was definitely hostility; it was hate. Adelia’s younger brother, Christopher, seemed not to like me.

In fact, I was expecting this to some extent. Prince Adrian was the one who had inflicted countless wounds on the body of the boy’s only sister. As time passed, the wounds had healed, but that in no way meant that the mistakes of the past had disappeared. In other words, I was the villain who had abused his sister. Since then, the hurt couldn’t have been erased from Adelia’s heart merely because I had shown her dearness and changed her attitude towards me.

It was rather a strange situation, and I couldn’t expect to be favored. I knew it, but I wasn’t in a very good mood.

It wasn’t the first time I’ve experienced someone who stared at me with hatred and resentment—and these emotions had looked the same when they had existed in Anne’s eyes. As I gave a sigh, I suddenly felt a gaze fall on me. It was Adelia. As our eyes met, she gave an abashed laugh. Hers was a gentle and caring smile, and I could feel no resentment coming from her. Seeing her ever-consistent appearance, I felt good. Because of this, I also started smiling while looking at her.

“Hgmm,” Carls coughed and glanced at Christopher.

“Oh, it’s okay to get up now.”

Only then realizing Christopher had been on his knees for a long time, I hurriedly told him to rise.

“Thank you,” he said politely as he stood, but his voice didn’t sound very sincere.

“I wanted to meet you, but I barely had the time in the past. Nice to meet you.”

Even with a friendly greeting from my side, Christopher did not respond. He just looked down as if embarrassed. I felt a clear emotional wall in his attitude, what with him not even saying he was glad to meet me. This was the karma left for me in this world, so I pledged I would talk in a friendly way to him. Yet, Christopher remained cold toward me. At this, Adelia stepped up, no longer able to watch.

“Chris.”

Christopher looked at his sister. His eyes spoke—he was saying he had had enough; he didn’t want to go on with this.

“Chris,” Adelia called her brother again. The resentment again came to Chris’s face, though Adelia did not notice it; she merely looked at her brother sternly.

“Hurry.”

Her eyes, her attitude, were so strict. Christopher, who had stubbornly kept his mouth shut, spoke after a while, shrugging his shoulders in resignation.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Highness.”

Adelia was still looking at him with her stern expression.

“Adelia.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“You seem to like to act tough at home.”

Adelia stiffened at my words, eventually blushing. As I saw her, I knew she was still the usual woman that I knew. However, it seemed that how she naturally acted toward me was not necessarily how she acted toward others.

“What, sister?”

Christopher looked at his sister, seemingly shocked. Then he suddenly turned his head to me, and the resentment contained in that gaze was enormous. His eyes made him look almost criminal.

“Chris.”

Adelia noticed a flicker of that gaze, and so she shot another harsh glance at her brother. At this, Christopher shuddered and lowered his head. I instinctively realized by looking at him—the reason the boy before me hated me wasn’t just because of the mistakes of the past. I didn’t think the day would come when this boy would like me, I thought. It was as expected.

The time we spent at Adelia’s house was not very long, and throughout that time, Christopher was hostile to me.

Covertly enough that his sister didn’t notice, cleverly enough that she couldn’t get angry.

“So what do you want to do?” I asked him.

“Nothing yet.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“There isn’t.”

I steadily spoke to him, keeping my attitude consistent and sincere. The boy was seventeen now, and I didn’t want to provoke his juvenile emotions. However-

“How about living in the palace? If you’re living there, it’ll be good to stay close to your sister, right?”

“Fine.”

My patience soon ran out, faced with his blunt answers.

“What do you like?”

“There is nothing.”

My anger began to swell; he had a way to scratch on my nerves. And as a result-

“Oh, this young man is stiff to the world!” I exploded.

“If an adult speaks, you have to at least pretend to listen properly. What? Is there anything you want to say? That makes sense? Aren’t you coming of age next year?”

Once the irritation I had endured came out, I couldn’t control it.

“Your sister, when she was your age, had already gone through all kinds of hardships as a royal maid to feed her family. Now, you’re seventeen and you still don’t know what career you’re going to enter?”

At this, Christopher opened his mouth wide.

“Would you like to continue living in your sister’s shadow?”

“Well, I’m not that-”

“No, don’t interrupt. Your sister keeps this house. Earns money. There’s nothing regrettable about being helpful, but you just want to roll around in life? That makes you very happy, right?”

Looking at his completely distorted face, I felt like I was getting to him. In the wake of my attack, I even organized the affairs of Adelia’s household.

“You don’t need to be idle at all. Your aunt is away? When this woman, who is your aunt, returns, pack your luggage and come to the palace. Carls?”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Is there any room left in my palace?”

“There are a few rooms that are not being used.”

“Yeah. Then, you can stay there. I will secure a spot in the Ministry of Justice, so you can learn real work while running errands.”

Christopher said something, but I ignored it.

“Shut up—because I don’t want to hear it. What? You hate me? I can’t help it, even if I don’t like it. This is not a solicitation or a request, it’s an order. It’s impossible to refuse. What? Dissatisfied? Hey, but what can you do? I’m the Crown Prince of this country. You won’t be able to say anything, and you’ll grow up quite a bit. Well, the prime minister might have the heart to listen to your complaints. What are you going to do, young one?”

Christopher, who had been rendered vacant by my words, looked at his sister as if asking for help.

“Thank you for your consideration, your Highness.”

However, instead of taking his side, Adelia promptly thanked me.

“Wha- Sister!”

The embarrassed guy called to her, but all he got in return turned out to be her stern gaze.

“What are you doing, Chris? Come one—say thank you to his Highness.”

Christopher bowed his head, faced with Adelia’s resolute attitude that would brook no objection.

“Go- Thank you.”

“I’ll know you’re grateful when you learn how to work hard and pay for your meals. Stop suffering.”

The young man didn’t answer; he just trembled whilst wearing an angry and affronted face. As I looked at him, I laughed. I have done this at least, but my punishment of the cheeky kid was not over.

“Adelia.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

I hugged Adelia in front of her brother. Of course, she did not refuse my embrace.

“Highness?”

She simply tilted her head and questioned this sudden show of affection.

“Whoo- Sister?”

Until then, Chris’s face had been filled with anger and indignation; now his adult-like face changed to better suit his age. This meant that he seemed to be on the verge of crying. I looked at him and pulled up the corners of my mouth. I wanted to make sure he knew how I felt.

**

Carls Ulrich sighed.

He was very embarrassed to see the prince laugh with his hand on Adelia’s waist in front of a boy who was five years younger than himself, who hadn’t even yet attended his ceremony. In fact, it wasn’t a new thing for Carls to encounter.

The prince was more knightly than anyone on the battlefield, but other than that, he was generally arbitrary.

When he was childish, he was endlessly childish, and when he began to force a matter, there was nothing he would not do. In recent years, the prince’s body had been in so much danger that Carls had a hard time dealing with him, so he had forgotten this aspect of Prince Adrian. This was who the prince really was.

With this in mind, Carls wasn’t embarrassed anymore by such childish behavior, which was difficult for him to watch. He thought that it was fortunate that the Crown Prince, who had been severely injured, now acted more like he used to.

Even if it was his selfish side showing off power and majesty in front of a seventeen-year-old, as well as his more ridiculous side of showing affection to the boy’s most important person in his life: his sister.

Carls realized everyone would be happier this way. The awkwardness of the prince

giving adult lessons in such a boisterous manner was not that big a problem.

“Anyway, I’ll keep an eye on you from now on. Remember—if you make your sister cry, I’ll send you to the North. Remember that.”

Hearing this, Carls, who would usually have become exasperated, just merrily watched on. Because of this, he only noticed the prince’s fatigue when it was too late.

“Hgum-”

Prince Adrian, who had been talking for some time, yawned, with his eyes becoming very dreamy. Then, he began dozing off while standing.

“Sir Carls…”

It was then that Adelia gave the palace knight a subtle glance. Carls carefully picked the prince up.

“What are you doing?”

“I will take him to the palace on my back.”

“No,” the prince mumbled, “I’m going with my own two feet. I’m not a kid, you know.” And yet, contrary to his words, he did not resist Carls piggybacking him. He merely closed his eyes and drooped his head over the knight’s shoulder.

“It looks like your Highness isn’t used to so much activity.”

“I walked through our capital today, and there was that marvelous fuss at the pub, so it’s all worth it,” came the prince’s reply to Adelia, and Carls then turned about and left her house. The only thing the sister and brother shared before she stepped out was a quick meeting of the eyes.

“Doesn’t your brother need more time?” Carls asked her.

“Because his behavior has offended me so badly, I will make sure I never see the day he treats his Highness as he has done today.”

“It didn’t mean that you have to leave your home.” Carls shook his head as he thought of all this constant strictness, then added in a low voice, “Our escort is large enough.”

“Ha,” some knights surrounding Carls grumbled sarcastically.

“Let’s go.”

And so, Carls headed to the palace. The prince’s body felt very light on his back. His frame wasn’t bulky, but it was natural considering his recent crisis. Still, each step Carls took was heavy.

“By the way, since his Highness is asleep, it will be difficult to hide our excursion from the outside world. That’s a big deal.”

Carls was guessing that the entire palace might be overturned. Maybe it was already happening? Carls had been prepared for failure from the very start, but now that the time came for them to return, he couldn’t help but worry, fearing that the Crown Prince may be severely punished for this.

Still, it would be folly to spend the night outside the palace, Carls constantly reminded himself, even if it felt as if his feet could walk no more. As he continued on, step by step, he reached the walls of the royal palace. He knew that just around the next corner, he would see the palace gates.

“Well?”

Carls, rounding the corner with a sigh, widened his eyes. A group of humans were standing to one side of the broad alley.

“Duke of the North?”

They were the young duke and his rangers.

“If you are so excited to walk around, would you mind if we gave you a lift?”

Duke Balahard, who only then saw the prince on Carls’s back, clucked his tongue in a displeased manner.

“Duke-”

“There’s no need to explain the situation. I guess his Highness must have forced you.”

The northern lord clucked his tongue again, and then took off his cloak, draping it

over the prince.

“Follow me.”

Vincent then took the lead, heading toward the royal palace gate.

“Duke?”

“I left something behind.”

“Is that so? But at a time like this…

“It doesn’t matter if you let us in through the side door.”

“If so…”

The knight guarding the gate, without a doubt in his heart, opened the palace’s side door.

“March.”

Rangers and northern knights tramped through the door.

“Oh, this is a lot of work for this late at night.”

“It would be nice to chat with the Royal Knights again, if possible.”

“You like working overnight? Hey, how about we have a drink together on our way out if our shift times run out?”

The knight who was guarding the gate made sure to keep his face thoughtless as he heard the loud chatter. Meanwhile, Carls Ulrich was able to sneak through the side portal, entering the palace. And finally, they arrived at the prince’s palace, where Carls carefully lay him on his bed, then looked at the duke.

“Duke of the North, this is-”

“If it was a social visit, it’s okay. I’ve grown up in a castle, I know the circumstances.”

Vincent still stared at the prince as he suddenly mentioned something.

“Next time this is going to happen, secretly send someone to let me know. We should at least avoid bringing down his Majesty’s wrath.”

Vincent made it clear he would be the prince’s shield, regardless of whether he pretended to be a ranger or not.

“Of course, it would be better if I can stop him from going out before that,” the duke grunted and turned around. “What do you think will happen if his Majesty knows I met you? Rather than thanking me, he will chew me out for avoiding my duties.”

And with these words, Duke Balahard left the room.

Things grew quiet for a while, then, ‘It’s like he’s a kid with a nosebleed, and the only kid on the beach. When the hell is he going to become an adult… ’

The volume of the complaints that filtered through the door gradually decreased, and then were heard no more.

“I have to change his Highness’s clothes,” said Adelia.

“Oh, okay. Let’s leave.”

Carls Ulrich, who had been watching the sleeping prince for a while, promptly left the room.

Prince Adrian slept on, oblivious to the world.

**

The following day, and the one after that, the Crown Prince left the palace. Unlike the first day, the party didn’t slip outside until the sun had set. For the palace knights, who did not know when the king’s fiery wrath would fall upon them, this was like walking on a sheet of thin ice.

They weren’t nervous or insecure all the time, though. It was quite enjoyable for the palace knights to see the Crown Prince in lively spirits. It was as if every day was new to him. The prince’s curiosity was as all-encompassing as that of a child who was just getting to know the world.

However, this excessive activity and extraordinary curiosity, which seemed without

end, gradually decreased over time. The palace knights were pleased with this, but on the other hand, it made them strangely sad.

It was like watching a child growing up to become an adult within a very short time-frame. Two weeks passed in this manner, and the Crown Prince was experiencing a period of flurrying changes. His emotions changed several times a day. Sometimes he became angered by nothing, or laughed for an entire day over trivialities. At other times, he would just blankly stare at the sky all day long. This rapid changing of emotions was so devouring and extreme that even the palace knights, who were honest warriors, became sick of the prince's whims. More time passed.

The chaotic feelings of the prince had suddenly returned to their usual state.

"Shall we go outside of the capital?"

Sometimes the knights had to be stern, but the days had become generally calm. It was now the third week since Prince Adrian began wandering through the capital. Suddenly, a fully armed palace knight stepped out in front of the Crown Prince, who was busy chatting with some merchants who wandered around the plaza. The prince brazenly pretended not to notice the knight's attitude and decided to turn away from him.

'Chuck!'

At this, other palace knights appeared and blocked off his retreat, however.

"Well, what? I didn't violate the order not to enter the main palace."

Even when the situation had reached such a critical point, Prince Adrian was easygoing.

"Your Highness the Crown Prince, under his Majesty's command, you are to go to the hall without delay!"

It was the same messenger the king had sent last time, and the prince knew he had to go to the king. He remained consistently calm—at least until he came to the hall, where the mysterious guest took off his hood.

CHAPTER 280
THERE WAS A REAL GIFT (4)

When Carls arrived at the hall, he predicted that the Crown Prince would not be able to escape reprimand. He thought that he himself might also be censured for guilt by association. But it wasn't so.

The king quietly looked at the prince without saying anything, not scolding him for a second. The emotions contained in the king's gaze were so complicated that it was hard for Carls to read what the monarch was thinking.

"Are you willing to introduce your guests to me now?"

It wasn't clear whether the Crown Prince had noticed such signs about his father's disposition at all. Carls could not understand the atmosphere in the hall; it was strangely subdued.

"Ian."

After a while, the king spoke. His voice was as heavy as the somber atmosphere in the hall.

"Prepare your heart firmly."

The king beckoned the prince to silence before he could say anything. The palace knights guarding the hall's door swung it wide open.

'Bft!'

A man with a hood pulled low over his head stood in the middle of the archway. Black fur was draped over his shoulders, and he wore a thick cloak that covered his entire body. Leather armored bolstered with iron plates he wore over the cloak. It was the typical clothing style for a northern knight. The peculiar aspects were that the man was fairly large-built compared to the average skinny northerner and that one of his arms had been severed at the shoulder.

‘Thud!’

The giant knight, who had not said a word as his eyes scanned the hall, stepped forward. He took another step. Soon, he strode on but was limping with each second step. Until then, the Crown Prince seemed to have no idea…

“He’s a little different from the guests I saw earlier.”

Prince Adrian merely noted that this man had not been among the other visitors.

‘Jrkf! Jrkf!’

All the while, the giant knight continued to hobble forward until he came to face the Crown Prince.

“Well?”

Prince Adrian, who had been pleasantly bright from the start, now frowned in silence. Then he suddenly widened his eyes.

“Well, no way…”

Disbelief arose in his round-stretched eyes. And at that moment-

‘Shh!’

The giant knight removed his hood. His hair was faded stark white; his forehead was full of wrinkles, and his face was stubbornly set. The prince looked at the knight’s face, trembling as if he was seeing a ghost.

“Uh, how…”

The knight stared at the prince without a word. Even if his face was so elderly, his stern gaze spoke of his strength.

“It’s been a long time,” the knight said, and his pronunciation was as sluggish as his gait.

“How have you been?”

The prince did not answer. He merely looked at the knight with a pale face. The knight wriggled, clearly frustrated. However, it was as if he was deciding whether to do something he did not like or not. He raised his hand to his mouth several times, and each time had to correct his expression.

After a while, a slim smile appeared on a face that was as ragged and crosshatched as an old rag. There was no mirth to the smile or any other emotion; it was just a thin grin on an ugly face. The knight was trying his best to smile, but the result was not adequate.

“I missed you,” he said with his distorted face. “Ian.”

Even if the words came out stunted, the Crown Prince trembled at the emotions contained within them. He looked as if he would fall right away. Usually, there were plenty of people who would have stepped forward and supported him, but none in the hall did so now. They merely watched the prince with complex emotions writ upon their faces.

“…Uh, what happened to you?” Prince Adrian asked after a long time in a tight voice.

“And- Why is your face like that?”

His face was shaken by grief and passion.

“Where are you hiding your arm?!”

It was a scream rather than a question.

“Why- Why is your face like this?”

“Why is there no answer? Answer me!”

Now, the prince was only screaming, so much so that he grew out of breath.

“Where is that devoted man gone… What happened to that majestic figure… Why are you this way?”

“But did you not just come back to life as well?”

The prince now allowed all his energy to run out.

“So don’t pull this on me.”

The knight twisted his lips upward. Seeing that jolly grimace, the prince-

“That’s what I mean!”

At this, he got angry.

“Why didn’t you come right away!”

“I couldn’t come.”

“You couldn’t at least deliver me the news!”

“It wasn’t like that,” the knight replied, almost in a scream.

“For some, the path of recovery is only a month. But for me… it was a path I had to walk for seven years.”

Seeing the knight show off his missing arm and hobbled leg, the Crown Prince clenched his teeth.

“Come here,” urged the knight.

“No!”

The prince shook his head vigorously.

“How long will you be so angry?”

“I definitely said no!”

The prince’s rejection did not sound as if it came from his heart, however.

The knight reached out his hand, the direction it took subtly askew. As the Crown Prince saw this, his face became on the verge of tears.

“Oh, where are you looking- Now…”

Then he stepped forward and placed the knight’s hand on his shoulder with both his

hands. The knight promptly hugged the prince.

“I was so big you didn’t recognize me, little guy.”

“I hate to hear it.”

“But how are you so thin?”

“Now, who’s telling who-?”

“Stop getting angry.”

“…I’m not angry.”

The prince’s voice audibly softened.

“But why don’t you say something nice to me?”

“Well-Welcome back.”

And it quickly became a wet, teary voice.

“Uncle.”

The big knight, Bale Balahard, just laughed, with his marred face looking brighter than ever.

**

“How did you survive that mess?”

“I don’t know the details either. When I woke up, I was in the elven fortress.”

The two, young and old, chatted for a while.

“No way—those eyes are…”

“Different from what they use to be—they have a nasty temper.”

“A thing that tastes bad will not be refreshing no matter how long you chew!”

“There’s nothing to get angry about. If it weren’t for the elves, I wouldn’t have survived being surrounded by orcs. In addition to this, it wasn’t even a transaction that was low in terms of damage to my life.”

“That’s right! It would have been better for you to heal quicker! Someone had some money in it, I’m sure!”

In general, it was the Crown Prince who asked the questions and got angry, while it was Bale Balahard who spoke gently as he answered.

“When I first woke up, it was hard to lift a finger. It took me three years to get up and walk again. Then it took another three to get used to this body. After that, I looked for my one chance, but it wasn’t easy to escape their fortress.”

“That’s right. Because the damned faeries aren’t a tribe that likes making things easy.”

The Crown Prince clucked his tongue, saying he didn’t have to see it to know the truth.

“Even if you become able to resist ordinary elves, how will you handle high elves? And even if you are lucky enough to evade them, where will you go in that forest, able to judge only with the eye?”

“Even if it wasn’t easy, I’m still curious how you did it,” the Crown Prince asked Bale how he escaped the elven fortress, which was a difficult thing to pull off even with a healthy body.

“The elves suddenly disappeared.”

“What do you mean?”

“The fortress was always busy, but one day, I could no longer feel the presence of those watching me. I hadn’t been confined, so I headed straight outside to check the situation. I found out that there was no one left in the fortress. I left the fort by the road, walking without rest.”

Bale Balahard spoke on about the circumstances at the time. He said he was lucky to have met the dwarves while he marched away from the fortress. Under their guidance, he was able to reach Winter Castle, immediately dispatching rangers to

explore the elven citadel. None of them could discover where the elves went.

“I came straight to the capital when I heard the news of you and the faerie…”

Bale Balahard, after having spoken for a long time, shut his mouth. Then he listened to his nephew’s breath, who leaned against his arm.

“His Highness has fallen asleep.”

It was then that Arwen Kirgayen, who had been standing back, stepped forward and informed everyone that the Crown Prince had fallen asleep, accepting his drooping body from Bale. The prince then mumbled drunkenly, his eyes still closed.

“Uncle… Don’t go anywhere. Stay the same.”

“Sure.”

“Sure.”

At this, the prince fell silent again. Arwen, who had been standing there for a while, bowed her before she left with the Crown Prince in her arms.

“What will you do from now on?” the king suddenly asked as he gazed in the direction in which they had left.

“I’m still fulfilling the oath made seven years ago,” Bale replied without any hesitation.

“What promises-”

“In the past, I pledged to support your Majesty as the head of the Balahard family, the commander of the Third Legion, the captain of the Black Lancers, and as a four-ring knight.”

“Yes, you said that.”

The king looked at Bale Balahard, his face momentarily distant. The imposing knight of the past was now a half-crippled man. He had been blinded and had lost his left arm. His legs were also hobbled, so his every movement seemed uncomfortable.

“Although I am no longer the head of the Balahard family, the commander of the Third Legion, or the captain of the Black Lancers…”

Nonetheless, the old man did not look too shabby.

“I still have one hand to hold my sword.”

Rather, he looked bigger than anyone else in the hall. And it wasn’t just that he was big-

“I bet…”

In fact, Bale Balahard was a giant.

“If I have five rings in my breast and a sword in my hand, I will not fall short in my service to your Majesty.”

For he was the first penta knight in the Leonberg Kingdom.

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Bale Balahard did not even leave the prince’s side.

“That’s what I mean—you cut one arm from the Warlord. I would have liked to see that, uncle, to see how he cried.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry, I should have been there when you took down the Warlord.”

“Well, now that I think about it, I don’t think there was anything great about the beast. After all, it was an orc.”

“That’s right. In the end, the Warlord was just an orc.”

Gripping onto his uncle’s shoulder like that, the Crown Prince continued to talk about the things he had seen and experienced over the past seven years.

“Do you know what the name of our mercenary company was at that time?”

“Hoh, yes? What was the company’s name?”

“Veil. Veil Mercenaries. I named us after you, uncle. Thanks to that, your name is widely known in other countries, so you should be grateful toward me.”

“Yeah. Thank you very much.”

No time was given for others to intervene in their conversation.

“This is a statue I made of uncle. I don’t need it anymore, but I still hold it dear, so I’ll give it to you.”

“I don’t know what that is, just at first glance.”

“That’s a shame. It’s a masterpiece that will never exist again.”

The two warriors exchanged stories all day long, almost as if they were the only two persons in the world.

“But that…”

“If you have anything to say, say it.”

“Wow, why do your eyes look so uncomfortable? I don’t mean to be inconvenient, but it rather’s weird.”

“…”

“There’s no need to feel sorry for me, I might have lost my eyes, but I got a bigger one.”

“A bigger one? What is that?”

“You will come to know gradually.”

So while the young and old man tried to catch up with each other after seven years, time continued to flow.

The heads of the kingdom were in the midst of discussing some sort of plan to welcome guests who were visiting the kingdom, and the Southern Legion and the knights deployed on that front were accelerating their preparations for war. As time flowed in and out of the royal palace, a small banquet was held.

“Well, is it my birthday?”

It was the prince’s birthday banquet, for he had not even attended his coming of age ceremony for the past few years. Considering the condition of his body, which was not hale, all the people were seated on simple seats, with the minimum number of personnel serving only the prince’s close relatives and associates.

“Oh, I really don’t need anything like this,” the Crown Prince said with an embarrassed face, yet he seemed happy with the party.

“Your Highness…”

Then came the time for a palace knight to kneel in front of the prince and present a small box to him.

“Your Highness, it’s an item from the South.”

“Southern? What is it?”

“I only know it was sent from the Southern Fortress, but I don’t know who exactly sent it.”

Hearing this, Carls Ulrich stepped forward and rebuked the knight’s frivolity in presenting an object before the Crown Prince if he had no idea who sent it.

“It’s your first duty to accurately know the source.”

The palace knight was about to withdraw the box when Arwen stepped forward and accepted it.

“Please take it, your Highness.”

“I don’t even know who sent it.”

“It’s a gift from Bernardo Eli.”

“How do you know the name when it isn’t written on it, Arwen?”

“I knew it the moment I saw it.”

Hearing her convincing tone, the Crown Prince smiled and soon opened the box with an expectant face.

A few seats away, the king was watching it all. His eldest son, surrounded by his knights and uncle, laughed and talked all day long; he seemed so happy. The king suddenly realized—the independence and great victories his son had achieved on his own were precious, but in fact, there was something truly precious. King Lionel squinted his eyes, and his mouth, which had been rigid with stubbornness, gently bent into a smile.

“I feel so good.”

Laughter came from the king’s lips.

“Hun, your Majesty?”

The old man next to the king looked at him with wide eyes. Regardless of that stare, the monarch laughed on without concern.

“Good! Good!”

This was the moment when King Lionel, who had been overwhelmed with worries all his life, learned to laugh aloud, letting go of all his worries and doubts for the first time ever.

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The sun went down, and the banquet was finally over.

The prince, who was tired after laughing and talking all day, fell asleep and was soon laid on his bed by some knights. Whether his dreams were good or not, the prince slept deeply with his mouth bent beautifully into a smile.

“Have a good dream, Ian.”

“Please rest in peace.”

Bale Balaahard and the other knights who had remained beside the prince finally left, and Adelia, sitting by the bedside while blankly looking at Prince Adrian, began to daze off.

The night passed, and the sun again rose.

“Woow.”

Adelia gently opened her eyes to the dim light filtering through the window.

“Ha-am.”

Giving a small yawn, she stood up and rubbed her eyes. It was the start of another day, with nothing special happening; all was usual—except for the fact that the prince was more twitchy today.

‘Ksha!’

It was so lovely to see the sleeping prince with his arms and legs hanging over the bed as he twisted his body, opening his mouth like a fool.

“Your Highness, if you sleep like this, your arms and legs become numb.”

Adelia gave a small laugh as she pushed the prince’s arms and legs onto the bed again.

“Huh?”

She tilted her head as she put her hand on the prince’s chest to correct his uncomfortable posture. Then she widened her eyes.

“Well, no way…”

Adelia hastily placed her hand on the prince’s chest again. In a short moment, her expression changed countless times.

Disbelief, anticipation, surprise; these emotions emerged one after another.

“Highness!”

In the end, this had become joy.

“What, what! Why, why!”

The prince, startled by the sudden rush of activity, jumped.

“What’s up?”

Adelia laughed brightly as she watched the prince awaken with an unbounded scream.

“Your Highness’s mana heart!”

“My mana heart! What is it!”

“Your Highness’ mana heart!”

“What about my mana heart?!”

CHAPTER 281
THE MEANING OF DAWN (1)

“Your Highness!”

I was half-awake, my head was blank, and Adelia kept saying things I didn’t understand. Nothing made sense to me anymore.

“Highness!”

“Why! So wha?t!” I screamed, faced with her hungry emotions.

‘Snp!’

Then, Adelia took my hand and started leading me somewhere.

“What are you doing now?” I asked, looking at both her hands placed side-by-side upon my chest, and she smiled brightly.

“Do you feel it?”

Her laughter and questions were beyond my grasp.

“Let me understand it step by step. I can’t figure out what the hell is-”

So, when I asked her what was going on, Adelia bit her lip, and I suddenly felt a sense of incongruity within me. It first started where her palms made contact with my chest. No, to be precise, I didn’t know whether it had flowed from the palms of her hands, or if it had, unawares to me, already flowed from her fingertips.

It was just confusing.

All I could do was keep my nerves on the alert, and focus with great desperation on identifying this unknown sense within my body. Something tickled my heart… Something very faint, so faint that you wouldn’t notice it if you don’t focus on it; and it was running through my chest. It felt exciting!

I pursued it as if I was possessed. Then it became liquid, a weak energy flowing through my heart. I knew what it was, with it instantly filling my heart: it was a source of strength I had lost since the day I died. It was the source of life I had to give up and thought to have been rendered irretrievable. Mana—the nature of the energy coursing through my chest was unmistakably mana. And not ordinary mana either, but the mana of my true body that I had longed for so much.

Although it was only a small part of the original powerful energy, it could only create a slim sword aura on its own.

At this point, I was now fully awake. It felt as if, after walking in the fog, my hazy spirit awakened at once. Only then did I know why I hadn't noticed the energy flowing through my body immediately. It was too strange in nature to notice early. My mana heart was still terribly broken.

"How the hell?"

Just in case, I checked it again. This was no miracle… my artificial mana heart was still as dry as desert sand, still broken and unchanged without even a handful of energy. Nevertheless, it was clear that mana had flowed through my body. I tried to clear the confusion and concentrated my mind. I marshaled my consciousness and contemplated my insides. Where did the mana originate, and where did it go? I chased the slowly-flowing mana, and I pursued the energy for such a long time that it became frustrating. Still, I finally found out where the mana began and ended: my heart. This was not mana flowing through my artificially-woven mana heart, but rather more integrated, with it starting within my real heart, becoming one with me, and ending there again.

My head was blank. There are people in the world who collect mana in their real hearts instead of mana hearts? And I'm like this, an abnormal case?

"Ha… Haha-"

Only laughter flowed from my lips.

"Your Highness!"

I was smiling with all my heart, and it felt too much unlike me-

'Waf!'

Adelia plunged into my arms.

“Sir! Congratulations, I don’t know how lucky you are! I actually believed, I certainly believed it, but…”

At first, Adelia was happy, then she became indecisive and suddenly burst into grotesque sobs. Her tears and runny rose sploshed all over me.

“Ugh.”

I hated it. Normally, I would have pushed her back for being dirty, but this time I couldn’t.

‘Guoak!’

Even though Adelia’s body was small, she was still an imposing champion of the kingdom, and it was impossible to prevent her from sticking to me like a leech.

“Adelia, let go of me…”

“I thought your Highness would do it. No matter what—that is your Highness.”

I told her to get off me many times, but she didn’t listen. With her nose making slobbering sounds, she continued to express her steadfast trust, again and again saying she believed that I would surely do it.

I hadn’t done anything. This ridiculous change that has just happened in my body was simply absurd. Even in the midst of so much confusion, I managed to remove Adelia from me with a shove; she was no longer sticking to me.

“Your Highness?” The door promptly opened and a palace knight entered; it was Carls.

“Did you feel comfortable at night… Your Highness? Sir Adelia?”

Carls tilted his head as he looked at Adelia and me.

“What have you been doing all morning?”

“His Highness has recovered his mana!” Adelia cried out before I could even open my

mouth.

Her usual, weepy tone was now filled with boundless excitement. Carls widened his eyes and looked at me. In a brief span, the honest palace knight's expression changed countless times.

"Your Highness, it's a good development."

Then, after a while, Carls gave a brief congratulation. As expected from the serious Carls, his reaction was plain. At least, I thought so.

"I will have to let his Majesty and others know about this good news."

Suddenly, Carls left, stomping out the door.

"His Highness has recovered mana! His Highness has recovered his body!"

Soon enough, I heard loud shouts come from outside the door. The loud sound of the knight's voice echoed throughout the palace.

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Not long after Carls had shouted, the guests began striking. It was the king and my knights, dragging the wizard along with them.

"What does it mean, healer? Come on, look at the prince's body and tell us."

Hearing the king's words, I rolled up my sleeves and stood before the wizard. The flashes of light gathered on his fingertips and he touched me all over my body. This time, he was again unusually meticulous in his examination.

"Let's look once more."

Even though he had already carefully studied my body, he declared he would do so again.

"You are working too hard, wizard."

The person examining my body was not in his younger years, and he was sweating. So, I felt sorry for him, praising him for his hard work. After I had bowed my head to

express my gratitude, he continued looking at my body for a long time. Then, his diagnosis finally finished, the wizard stepped back.

“It’s weird… It’s weird.”

Seemingly dumbfounded, the physician stroked his beard, his mouth agape. King Lionel asked for the reason for his befuddlement, not able to hide emotions.

“Obviously, his Highness’ mana heart remains damaged. If that was all it was, then there would normally be no mana.”

“It’s a fact that you have already confirmed, court wizard, or am I wrong?”

“It is not so. I also clearly felt the weak mana flowing in his Highness’s body.”

Mana not flowing through a mana heart or chain was a confusing concept for the wizard to grasp, and he said it was the first time for him to see such a thing.

“So, is there something wrong with my son’s body?”

“That’s not the case. As a careful result of examining his humors, I ascertained that he is not better nor worse off than he was a few days ago.”

Those who had been waiting for the healer’s answer with uneasy faces now sighed in relief, all of them at once. It seemed that my body had been in a very bad condition thus far, and seeing everyone be relieved just by the wizard’s diagnosis made me feel that things haven’t gone bad at all. The king and knights asked the wizard questions for a while after that, and the scholar answered them with sincerity. The conversation can roughly be summarized like this:

‘There isn’t a noticeable change right now, but a mana-bearing body has exceptional resilience, so if you watch him over time, there will be a difference.’

“You healed up on your own again.”

The king gave me a bold look. The knights didn’t speak up, but their expressions weren’t much different from the king’s.

“Congratulations, Your Highness.”

“I always say the beginning is half the struggle, so, sooner or later, there will come good things.”

They radiated a spirit of respect as if I had done something great. All I had done was go to sleep and wake up, as usual. In the meantime, only my uncle was confused, clearly not knowing what was going on.

“Uncle Bale?”

I was brazen, asking him why he didn’t congratulate me.

“Congratulations, Ian.”

Only then did he praise me—looking in the wrong direction. Suddenly, I was angry. I knew the faeries’ temperament was nasty, but looking into my uncle’s eyes, my fear of them soared.

“Stop overthinking things. Isn’t this the time when you should do your best to harden your body?”

My uncle was really good at discerning my inner emotions.

“What the hell are you saying?” I asked him bluntly, my heart upset. My uncle only made his ragged face laugh when he heard my words. The king and knights stayed by my side for a while after that, but they didn’t stay that long. The king said he had a job to do, and the others left after him. I realized they were leaving so that I could spend time with my uncle after being so long apart.

“But uncle—don’t you need time to talk to Vincent?”

“We shared as much as we need to.”

“That’s not true, he’s just his own child. I’m sure he’ll get upset.”

“He’s already out of my arms. Also, he’s a guy capable of leading the family and protecting himself.”

At that, I sneered.

“No.”

I remembered the terrible future that Ophelia had shown to me when my uncle asked me sternly, “It looks like he wasn’t very reliable to you?”

If I didn’t correct the misunderstanding right away, in all likelihood, Vincent would have to face his father’s loud voice for the first time in many years. I knew this well, but I didn’t dare to correct it.

“Why, no. His nagging is very bad. He’s always looking at what I’m doing, that side of him is a bit bad.”

Rather, I encouraged my uncle to punish Vincent. He needed to be scolded. At best, the weak-minded duke, who seemed to have died as if the world had come to its end, needed a prickly and swift education. That way, he would be able to stay alert enough to survive in this tough world. Of course, the incident I worried about hadn’t really happened, but that wasn’t what mattered.

“By the way, why did those damned guys hold you, uncle?”

“Just guessing, I think there was a hidden hand in the matter.”

“They thought that by keeping uncle, they would overturn the board.”

“Was my ransom so expensive?”

“That’s what I mean,” I responded, “the only duke in the kingdom is your son, and you are the Crown Prince’s nephew. Besides, you are the first penta-knight of the kingdom.”

“After hearing that, this body feels more precious to me.”

“So, please treat your body a little. What the hell do you want to do in your final years, when you should be watching your grandchildren?”

Hearing my words, Uncle Bale said with a smile, “Isn’t Vincent too ugly to have children? Why are you looking at me so slyly?”

I replied in a somewhat stern voice, “Don’t be confident with a penta-chain. I’ve been through one once, and pentas are not invincible.”

I told my uncle of the day when the Nightmare Knights attacked the palace. Of how I

fought and won that day. In fact, I had struggled to the brink of death, and I was bedridden for quite some time after the fight, but that's a story for another day. I was the one who had won, anyway.

"Okay? That's not much. I'm your enemy after all, as a penta-knight."

Then, I informed him that I, his nephew, was the great knight who had defeated a penta-knight, with my uncle telling me it was an honor to know this, and he said so with sincerity.

"According to your tale, you killed a foreign penta-knight, so you should be proud of that."

My uncle liked that I had won.

"What else have you heard so far? I have beaten more than penta knights."

I felt the same way. Still, no matter how close my uncle was to me, there were certain parts of him that could never yield.

"Well… This person called the Knight of Nightmare is not a proper penta-knight. It's very hard to sympathize with you."

My uncle was so laid-back that it was ridiculous.

"Oh, so if there is a fake penta, then what is a real penta?" Facing his attitude, my mood improved without me even being aware of it.

"Didn't you tell you before?"

However, my uncle remained calm.

"I- What do you mean?"

"That not all mana hearts are the same. That the real ones are different," my uncle imitated my speech.

"Why are you imitating my tone now?" I asked with a frown, but my uncle didn't seem to be listening to me.

“I will answer you the same way,” he just continued with what he had been saying, “just because someone has a penta-chain doesn’t mean they are a penta-knight. The real thing is different.”

He spoke in a tone full of confidence. It was a strange thing for me to witness. My uncle could barely see with his eyes, and he had lost an arm and even has a crippled foot. But it didn’t once sound as if he was bluffing. I was speechless as I stared at him. It was then that he softly asked me, “Do you remember?”

“What do you mean?”

“When I had gained a small clue in my heart, I asked you whether the power of Muhunshi was allowed to Ring Knights—what was the answer you gave me?”

I quietly searched my memory.

One day before the battle with the Night Slayer, what answer did I give my uncle?

“Although it’s impossible to write a poem and recite it—I think it’s possible if you act it out.”

“Stop changing my words now…”

“You might have given directions, but you never gave detailed instructions.”

I certainly had some memory of that.

At the time, my uncle stood in the middle of a forked road. I then thought that it was the goal of all Ring Knights to create poems to complete their power, so I spared my words. I couldn’t say anything about a road I’ve never traveled upon.

“Yes, you did. That’s why I was able to take my first steps on a road no one had ever walked, finally being able to become a penta-knight in the battle against the Warlord.”

My uncle’s voice noticeably softened.

“All thanks to you.”

“I didn’t do it seeking gratitude.”

“You can ask me not to be grateful, but I can’t help but pay you back.”

My uncle turned his head straight at me.

“What does it matter if it’s a chain, a mana heart, or a real heart?”

He went on to say, “Don’t be afraid that there is no way. The direction in which you walk will soon become the way.”

The paths already walked by others always end, yet never stop.

“Of course, it will not be easy. It will be as tough as wandering in pitch-black darkness. There will be hard moments with every step that you take.”

Uncle Bale added, “But I bet you now, a hundred times out of a thousand times, the pain will be joyful.”

He said that the joy and fulfillment you will experience while walking on the path could only be said to be unspeakable. His few words really meant nothing, but I could not reply—my mind flashed.

The days passed through my head. When I first woke up in this body, everything was fun. The fact that everything I had accomplished had come from my own will elevate me endlessly. It was fun, like when a warrior who does not know the thunderbolt is approaching swings his sword like crazy in the storm.

I had fun, but it ended. At some point, I completely forgot about such pleasures. Since then, training had just become a labor to recreate the power of the past, and all my actions became a struggle to make the kingdom escape its dark reality. I used to say I should be strong, and I said that wielding a sword was more fun than anything else. Suddenly, I was just following the past. It was only upon realizing this that I could escape from it. Only then could I see the present with unblurred eyes. And only after this can I finally live for the future.

‘Thump thump thump thump!’

My heart hammered madly in my chest. At that very moment-

A flash of light burst into my head. There was a great roaring in my ears.

‘Waaaw!’

It sounded as if a solid rock bank was being torn off a cliff. And one instant later, something poured into me from somewhere deep.

CHAPTER 282
THE MEANING OF DAWN (2)

It was mana—though mana that was fierce and roaring, moving with a will of its own.

'Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.'

The violent energy continued to rage like crazy. My heart seemed to burst, my body trembled. Whenever the energy passed, terrible pain arose in every inch of me; my whole body screamed. There was nothing I could do. It was hard. I just gritted my teeth and held on—but it was useless. The fierce energy stirring up my weakened body could not be handled by it. Wherever the mana passed, something collapsed. Insignificant muscles were rendered necrotic, and bones smoothly melted. I wished my eyesight would turn white, facing such a terrible pain that I couldn't handle.

'Peeeee!'

The ringing in my ears echoed through my head. My consciousness faded and became clearer repeatedly. If it had gone on like that, I would have lost my mind, and losing your mind at such a moment is no different from death. I bit into my tongue.

'Quack!'

Blood pooled into my mouth, and I completely swallowed it. My mind flashed as it registered the fishy taste. But I knew—biting into the tip of my tongue and swallowing the coppery blood was just a temporary way to escape the torment. I still didn't know when the raging waves of energy would end, and it felt as if my body was being crushed under a raging rock-fall. My consciousness, which had barely become clear, began to dissipate again. I desperately grasped onto it.

It repeatedly flickered and blinked, and my body screamed without ceasing. My mind was constantly being worn out. Nevertheless, I continued to hold on. How do I come back to life? How do I get back my life?

I was not willing to face such a vain end.

A time of great pain ensued. Then, I felt no more pain. This wasn't a good thing—I felt sorry that my body had collapsed to the point where pain could not be felt. It felt as if half of my body was gone. It was unclear whether I was lying in bed or standing on the floor. Suddenly, a thought came to my mind: maybe the world around me had been an illusion from the beginning. My resurrection was just a dream, and I was still lying on that plain on that day, a cold corpse. Perhaps this happiness I was now enjoying was the last luxury given to a soul on the verge of extinction. The faces of my dear ones came to my mind. The figure of my uncle, who I had finally reunited with, was clear.

All of this suddenly began to become vague. At that time, the world around me began to rapidly dissipate.

'…Woow.'

If it wasn't for a noise I heard, I would have fallen away from the world like that.

'Ooh ooh.'

It was a sound I heard with exceptional clarity even in this hazy reality of unclear sensations.

'Woow.'

The clear resonant sound awakened my spirit, which was on the verge of being separated from the world.

"I piled up greenskin corpses and raised myself a mountain,"

One moment later, a soft voice broke through into my ears.

"Crimson nails of blood flowed from it."

I turned my head, seeking the voice. There was my uncle, all wrapped in a blue cloak.

'Ooh ooh.'

The five rings he was so proud of resonated vigorously.

"And I will honor your soul before it."

I began chanting [Poetry of True Soul] just like I had done when the poems of my previous life were reborn.

'Pot!'

The hazy world became clear.

"Silent are the snowy peaks and the blood-drenched walls."

My heart, which had been beating sporadically, now took on a regular rhythm, following the resonance of the rings.

"Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance"

I was still wracked by pain, and my body was still falling apart to compensate for the unbearable mana. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but ask, "H-How?"

I stuttered, and yet my lips weren't moving properly.

"Isn't it natural that I've practiced on my own?"

Even in the final battle we had together, my uncle had not been able to hide his awkwardness when singing along with war poetry; now he was naturally vocalizing it like a true poet. My uncle didn't have a dark tone in his eyes while reciting, and that was amazing.

"I had no sword, and seeing that I was blind, if I didn't want to go mad, I had to talk to myself like a crazy person."

My uncle said dance poems were nice to mumble alone, and he said this with a ragged burst of laughter. But I couldn't laugh—it's been seven years. My uncle had spent seven years alone as a prisoner. And in that dark, blind world, he had only himself for company. It didn't sound like an exaggeration for him to say that in order not go crazy, he recited many unconventional poems.

I bit my lip.

"That's a shame. If you had known the last verse, you would have been a little less bored."

I concealed my inner thoughts and acted excited as I tried to raise my uncle's spirits.

"There's a final verse? Is that like a new war poem?"

"You bet. I like the final verses more than the first ones."

It was the song of finally greeting spring after enduring the harsh winter, and it was there was no other song I was more eager to teach my uncle.

"I'm looking forward to it," he said with a laugh as if the poem was worth knowing.

"But before that, start with your mana. If you don't fix it quickly, your body will be greatly weakened." Uncle Bale asked me to focus on the task at hand.

"Wait a minute…" I softly replied as I promptly corrected my posture. Although my uncle had taken the reins by resonating his five rings, the mana was still running wildly within me. In the end, it was my job to grab the reins and lead it.

"Woo," I took a deep breath, and I began contemplating my body. My insides were messed up by the unbearable amount of mana. My fingers and toes were shriveled, and my flesh was twisted. In such a messed-up body, the mana was flowing randomly within me. It would probably not stop until it turned my body into a bloody pulp. I looked for a break, found it, and grabbed the reigns of the raging energy.

'Ahhhhhhhhhh!'

The mana began to run wilder, crazier. It was such a powerful energy that I wondered if I would be able to lead it properly even if I had all my Sword Master mana intact. In contrast, I now only had a handful of my own mana. It would be strange if I could easily guide this energy. Still, I had no intention of giving up.

'Wow!'

In every urgent moment, my uncles' rings resonated fiercely and added their strength. So, without giving up, my uncle succeeded in opening a path and added his willpower. His first ring was difficult to get through; the second and third faced less difficulty. The fourth and fifth were far easier. I continued to spiral in the direction the energy was going in and guided it where I wanted it. It didn't want to follow my guidance. Whenever I moved it along the path, it would turn its head and jump away

whenever it got the chance. I persistently led such a thing by the reins, and it remained fierce. But at some point, it started to express this ferocity by simply running violently along a fixed path. Whether I told it to slow down, speed up, stop, or start moving again, it followed no commands. I also didn't try to force control over it. I would simply take the reigns from time to time and prevent it from veering off the road. One, two, three…

Mana now ran constantly through my body. Little by little, as it flowed, it melted into my heart. From here on out, it was time to fight. Either my body would become completely pulped and melted, or I would completely settle the mana in my heart.

Ten seconds. The energy rumbled, and a thick liquid flowed out of my nose.

Twenty seconds. Suddenly, blood spilled from my mouth.

Thirty seconds. My entire body seemed to be burning.

Forty seconds. My vision had long since faded to white.

Fifty seconds. I heard no sound.

Sixty seconds. The sensation of having a body disappeared.

Seventy seconds. My consciousness began to intermittently fade.

Eighty seconds. Death was approaching.

Ninety seconds. Now was the limit.

"Back!"

I turned the direction in which the mana flowed with all my energy—somewhere in the direction of my broken mana heart. My mana heart began absorbing mana at a rapid pace. But as it was, it was already a broken vessel, so it could no longer hold anything.

'Bkra Bkra!'

A crack appeared in my mana heart.

‘Bang!’

Then, it shattered with a loud sound. Slivers of my fragmented mana heart spread throughout my body, scattering to all points of it. The slivers all started to melt.

“Twaah!”

Terrible pain blossomed wherever a fragment had gotten stuck. My sensations quickly revived, and my sense of time normalized. My hearing was restored—touch, smell, and taste; I had regained all my original functions. That was the beginning-

‘Wuduk!’

My broken body began to regenerate rapidly. This rebirth was accomplished from a state of near-total collapse.

“At last…”

However, instead of moaning, I was delighted.

‘Qwaak!’

Both my hands strengthened up. Until moments before, these two fists could barely hold a carving knife; now they were firmly muscled.

“Adelia!” I shouted.

‘Bwok!’

The door opened, and Adelia entered.

“Highness?”

As she looked at me with her eyes wide open, she turned pale.

“Your Highness! Blood all over your body!”

“Okay! Sword!” I cried out to her. “Twilight! My sword!”

Faced with my sudden words, Adelia was unsure about what to do, and tears began

welling in her eyes.

“Hurry!” I pushed her back. I couldn’t stand being without a sword right now.

“Well, wait a minute-”

Adelia, after staggering back, left. When she came back, she was holding my sword.

“Here…”

She carefully handed Twilight over, and I grasped it. It was nice to have the cold touch of the hilt in my hand. Unwittingly, I raised the corners of my mouth into a grin. My mind felt endlessly elated.

“Hoofoo.”

The breathtaking feeling of fullness made me take long, peaceful breaths.

“I- Your Highness?”

Adelia looked at me and widened her eyes. Ignoring her, I quietly lifted my sword.

“Your Highness! Not in here!”

I heard Adelia’s scream-

‘Pwot!’

And then slashed my sword down. A light appeared where my sword passed. It was like a ray of dawn driving away the deep night. This bright ray of light spread across the darkened room, filling my eyes. I watched the light as if possessed. I stared blankly at it until it completely disappeared, leaving no trace.

“Finally!”

I clenched my fist, and laughter burst out from deep in my lungs. I couldn’t withstand it; like a madman, I was bent double at the waist as I laughed so much that my stomach felt sore and tears came from my eyes. After laughing for a long time, I sheathed my sword at my waist and declared, “I am back.”

I’ve come a long, long way, and I was finally back.

So I cried, “I’m back!”

Right then-

‘Crshka!’

A threatening noise broke into my ears.

“Highness!”

One instant later, I heard Adelia’s screams.

CHAPTER 283
THE MEANING OF DAWN (3)

Adelia hugged me to her, then broke through the window, throwing my body out of the room.

'Kruung!'

I heard a roar and took one terrified step onto the fluffy grass.

"Uh?"

Almost at the same moment, my palace collapsed. It didn't just collapse—it exploded.

'Dang Dang Dang!'

Not even a second later, I heard the urgent clanging of a bell.

"Palace knights, gain an immediate grasp of this turmoil!"

"It's the Crown Prince's palace!"

Shouts sounded from all over. At the same time, I heard footsteps echoing.

"Find your lord and serve him!"

"Royal knights, lock and guard the gates! Palace knights, search for intruders!"

The royal palace became noisy as if there was a war on. Only then did I realize what I had done.

'Tak tak.'

Adelia got up, brushing the dirt off her body.

“I know just by listening that at least half of your Highness’s palace must have collapsed.”

Her voice sounded as if she would burst into laughter at any moment.

“Your Highness, I’m glad you’re safe.”

Adelia was simply relieved about my safety.

My mind felt so vacant.

“That child! Where is the prince!”

The king came to my palace with angry shouts. Usually, if there was trouble, he would only appear later, so why was he here so quickly today? The king passed through the main gate of the palace, looked at me, and widened his eyes.

“Are you okay! Do you have any injuries?”

The king ran screaming to me from a distance, finally coming to a stand before me.

“What the hell is that blood?! What happened to your palace?!”

He looked at me, his face pale, and made a fuss.

“Was it the imperials?!” Vincent demanded, looking at me with a sharp glint in his eyes. Arwen, whom I had not seen enter, looked in all directions with her sharp eyes. Carls and the other palace knights all held shields, and they surrounded the king and me as if we were in the middle of a battle.

“I’m asking you what the hell is going on! Are imperial agents really attacking your palace?” the king asked me, his face still pale. My mouth was stuck as if glued closed, and I could not readily speak. I pretended to be injured for a very short time but then became worried about lying down.

“That-”

I repeated the same word and rolled my eyes. In my mind, I was searching for a way to escape the crisis. Even if I said the sky collapsed, or that a hole rose from the earth—there must be a way.

“It’s not an imperial raid!”

I thought I could manage it, at least until Adelia opened her mouth.

“You are telling me that he ruined the palace!” the king bellowed. Adelia could have noticed his anger several times, but it would have been useless. She was simply overwhelmed by the fact that I could wield my sword again, so she told the entire story to the king.

“His Highness suddenly gripped his sword!”

She spoke of how dangerous my energy with the sword was, how I attacked compared to the past, and how the palace collapsed—every useless detail.

“So that means you drew your sword and ruined the palace.”

Everyone looked at me at once. I could see on their faces that they had not yet grasped the situation properly.

‘Shh!’

I silently lifted Twilight and channeled mana into it.

‘Wow’

A dim light bloomed, a clear sword aura.

“Oh oh!”

The knights cheered in joy. Arwen subtly twisted her mouth upwards, Vincent smiled, and Carls was clenching his fists, looking thrilled. Maximillian shouted cheers for his elder brother. The king’s face also showed rare excitement.

“You’ve crossed a slope! You’ve crossed a slope!” The king congratulated me on my recovery by shouting the same words again and again.

“But why the hell did your palace collapse?” he asked me as the excitement subsided. I kept my mouth shut.

“What the hell is all that blood?”

Instead of answering, I let Twilight's handle shimmer. I did it repeatedly, letting dim black light bloom and fade.

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After that, Adelia continued to explain the situation. The problem was that she was praising me more than explaining anything. Soon, the king began looking for someone else to investigate the affair.

It was my uncle who came out, then. He explained the situation clearly as if he had seen it with his own eyes.

"He recovered his body, and then he got excited and broke his palace."

His account was oversimplified, but in any case, it helped to clear up the situation far more than Adelia's rambling litanies could have. The king looked at me with complicated emotions in his eyes. I could see he was glad that I had recovered but also worried that I would run as wild as I had before.

"Since your body has recovered, you have become healthy. There is nothing more important than that."

Contrary to my expectations, the king did not reproach me greatly.

"You'll need a place to stay, so for the time being, you'll use an empty palace."

Rather, he even comforted me by saying that I should endure even if I would live roughly for the time being.

"It's a hundred times better to wield and strike compared to being like a sick chicken," Vincent said. When his own castle had collapsed, he had cared about nothing else, I thought.

"It's a good thing. It's really good," Arwen smiled gently and offered her congratulations.

"I'm sorry, your Highness, I should have been there for you." Carls apologized to me, saying he was sorry for not being able to be with me during an emergency. The more people wrapped around my faults like this, the more uncomfortable it made me feel. I would rather want to shake the whole incident off quickly and quietly instead of

listening to their harsh scolding. However, I couldn't hold onto that which had forever passed. Because I was like this, I decided I would get out without shame. My palace had collapsed anyway, so there was no reason for me to regret it now. Rather, what was important was that I had finally regained my strength. I quietly checked my body.

Although more than half of the mana was consumed to regenerate my body, a huge amount of it was still vibrating in my heart. The nature of the boiling mana seemed similar to the type I knew, but it was different. I couldn't figure out what the difference was. The same was true of when I swung my sword through the air, and I knew that there was only one way to learn the difference.

'Shh!'

I rolled my eyes until Adelia, Arwen, and the other champions finally came into sight. All of them were strong warriors of the kingdom, but they weren't who I needed now. I turned my head again. An old white-haired knight stood before me.

"Uncle Bale?"

Looking at my uncle's face, it seemed as if he knew what I wanted.

"Is it really true when you say that just because someone has a penta-chain doesn't make them a penta-knight?"

I wanted him to affirm that the Nightmare Knights were not true penta-knights.

"If you can't believe me, try it out for yourself."

My uncle laughed, revealing his teeth. His face was as arrogant as it was on that day when our swords had clashed here. It had been a long time since I had recalled this old thought.

"Are you okay?" I asked my uncle, lifting my chin as high as I had on that day, provoking him.

"You look like a mouse who's worried about the cat," my uncle said and laughed.

"Don't think I won't beat you, even if you are my uncle?"

“Don’t worry—do you think I’ll get beaten by you?”

My uncle subtly favored my challenge as if he was curious about my power to defeat a penta-knight. The king, watching our exchange, deflated his mouth as he sighed.

“It might be better to go back and rest for a while,” the king suggested with another sigh, and he seemed exhausted after observing my body for a while. Just after the king spoke, Maximilian opened his mouth.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve come to my palace, brother. Why don’t you stay in my palace while yours is like this? You can also duel in my training room.”

I shook my head as I looked into his eyes, which seemed to be filled with burdensome emotions.

“I might visit later. Now, I want to duel. You don’t have to go to your palace either.”

I then glanced at my ruined palace. There was no place more suitable than here, within the collapsed ruin that could sustain further damage. The king stepped back with a face of utter resignation. The palace knights quickly cleared away rubble and created a large empty space. Meanwhile, Adelia had led my uncle into the middle of the ruin.

“Thank you.”

“It was nothing.”

My uncle curtly thanked Adelia, then drew the sword buckled at his waist. I held my sword in front of me as I faced him. I moved my sword back and forth in front of his eyes, but he didn’t respond.

“Are you really okay?”

I was worried about whether he could properly clash his sword with mine.

“Has the meaning of dueling changed while I was away?” He asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I asked whether it has become fashionable to clash with words instead of with

swords."

My uncle didn't know how strong my heart had become, and he condemned me for being chatty.

"I really worry about you as much as I can."

"You first suggested this duel."

"That's so, but don't go resenting me afterward."

"Who said I was going to do that?"

Looking at my uncle, who was speechless, I put my hand to my mouth and slowly widened my eyes.

"Let both persons end the battle without injuring each other's bodies," the king declared, trying to defuse the rising tension by reminding everyone that duels are not life or death affairs. His efforts were useless.

The knights were already breathing excitedly as they considered the fact that my opponent was a penta-knight who now wielded his sword after a long time.

"If you're going to do it, win with fire!"

Vincent even took the final step and outright cheered for me.

"I don't care about my father, who does not take care of his body. He said that raising a child is useless, and that's exactly what I am right now."

"As my son, would you not support me in my battle against his Highness?"

"…"

I laughed happily as the two noble men held an affectionate conversation.

"Please be careful not to harm your body."

"Do not get hurt, Your Highness."

I smiled as I heard Arwen and Adelia's requests. Carls and the palace knights cheered me on more carefully. Well, then there was Maximilian. From the first moment, he became lost in the excitement, openly cheering for me.

"I have devoted myself to the kingdom for decades, but no one here is on my side. It is useless, it is ephemeral."

As I heard my uncle speak in a sad tone, I gently raised my sword. Now was not the time to be getting drunk on old memories or to be joking around. After drawing my sword, I thought I would enter the duel with all seriousness—even if my foe was my dear uncle.

"Woo." My uncle, after measuring my mana, gave a long exhalation.

'Go-oh-oh-oh!'

Explosive energy flowed out of his body. It felt as heavy as iron and as strong as a fortress. A pile of rubble that had not been cleared away quaked and the dust that had barely settled on the floor bloomed into the air again. Actually, my uncle hadn't moved his sword once.

"That's it…" I said in an admiring tone, but that was all I could feel. Although his energy was incomparable to other Ring Knights, it was what I had expected to encounter up to this point. But when my uncle gathered energy on his blade-

'Shin!'

Things changed. His energy, as magnificent as steel, remained the same. The only difference was that this energy was now radiating out from his body. I straightened myself in a hurry, stiffening to protect myself.

"Uncle… why am I feeling so wrong now? I'm very confused," I told him with a frown.

Uncle Bale laughed, asking me out loud, "You think it's an illusion?"

It was as if he was reading my mind.

"It doesn't make sense," I replied, "unless I'm making a mistake."

"In this world, there are ridiculous things going on."

“No matter how much-”

“There’s nothing worse for you than when it comes to things that don’t make sense.”

“That’s what I mean…”

My uncle merely laughed.

“The only thing I could do for the last seven years was to recite the poem, reliving endless battles against the Warlord in my mind,” my uncle suddenly told me in a subdued tone. “I naturally got it after I recited it over tens of thousands of times.”

“That’s not so natural a way of getting it.

“But I got it.”

“So? I’m not saying I’m going easy on you.”

“If you’re already surprised, you’d be in trouble.”

“You have become weird while you haven’t seen civilization. Moreover, you keep mimicking my tone.”

“That’s because I don’t have someone else to talk to. I think it’s become a habit.”

“No. If you say that again, I feel-”

‘Shin!’

Before I was done speaking, my uncle aimed his sword at me.

“If you test it for yourself, all your questions will be answered.”

‘Pchk!’

My skin was tingling and my spine was cold. Just him pointing his sword at me was too much, but how wonderful would it be if I actually met him blade-to-blade?

My heart started hammering like crazy and my body heated up. My mind, in contrast, was cold.

“Haha,” I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. Uncle Bale forced his smile away and gripped his sword as he fixed it before him.

“It will be uncomfortable for you to move, so I’ll go first.”

My uncle didn’t answer me. I also didn’t crack jokes anymore. I just-

‘Fwa!’

I charged across the floor. At that moment, the tangible energy surrounding my uncle collapsed in toward me. It was like a landslide. I cried out as I struck out with my sword despite that heavy feeling as if being crushed by a great mountain.

“That’s right! Orcish fervor!”

“This isn’t fervor, it’s the Warlord!”

“Either this or that!” my uncle laughed, chuckled, then lowered his sword.

‘Qawah!’

The heavy tragedy of my ignorance felt like it would split my head open.

‘Bang!’

The shock that had been transmitted through our meeting of blades shook the inside of my body. I forced myself to endure it and tried to move forward, but suddenly stopped again. There were five clear scratch marks right in front of me. There were five on my side of the floor and none on Uncle Bale’s side.

“It’s only your words that are loud—you’re still a young man.”

While I looked at the floor blankly, my uncle tried to put some medicine in his words.

‘Warak!’

My face crumpled into a frown.

“Hey now, I just woke up from bed. I’m still getting used to the new state of my body.”

“Let’s see—I can barely see with borrowed eyes. I have only one arm. My feet are limp. But, my body is still good enough.”

Hearing my uncle’s words, I shut my mouth. After all my joking around, I had lost sight of my true purpose.

“Woo.”

I tried to correct my face as I fixed my sword before me.

“Be careful…”

Then I collected a flash of light at the edge of my sword.

“Because it’s not only uncles who can learn new tricks.”

‘Wow!’

The light of dawn came to the blade the swordmaster had forged with his soul. My uncle lowered his posture and prepared for my attack. Looking at him, I stood still, not rushing forward as I kept pushing mana to the edge of my sword. I channeled it, again and again.

‘Ooh ooh ooh ooh.’ Twilight cried, trembling in my grasp—as if it wanted to charge into battle right away. But I still stood firmly, with both my feet on the floor, not moving a single step. I just kept channeling mana into my blade. My heart hammered like crazy, spewing out more mana. It was the mana I had accumulated in my life as a sword. Ten years, twenty, fifty—it was power gained over a century. Mana flowed endlessly to the edge of my sword.

‘Qaw ahhh!’

A terrible wind began to rage around me. My uncle’s expression hardened.

“What the hell now…”

It was hard to read his face. I looked at him triumphantly.

‘Wow!’

Suddenly, my heart caught fire.

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